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# THE MAKING OF PROSE



*By the same Authors*

THE MAKING OF VERSE

# The Making of Prose

A Guide for Writers

By

ROBERT SWANN

*Cheltenham College*

AND THE LATE

FRANK SIDGWICK

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## PREFACE

This book was planned soon after the publication of *The Making of Verse*. In the normal course of events it should have appeared in the winter of 1939-40. But in August 1939 Frank Sidgwick died: a loss to me personally that I hope I may be forgiven for feeling as keenly as the vaster tragedies of the succeeding weeks and months.

People have spoken before now, jocularly and triumphantly, of friendships surviving a literary collaboration. Ours was never in jeopardy. And when *The Making of Verse* was finished and off our hands, there continued between us a correspondence that made many a breakfast of mine several degrees less bleak.

It is almost beyond my hopes that F. S. realised how much admiration the younger member of the partnership felt for the patience, gaiety and professional shrewdness of his collaborator; he was much too modest to have taken it into account and the very idea of it would, I think, have given him embarrassment.

More than this it would be out of place to say here, and I cannot fairly or decently suggest: "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice." Indeed, I feel a certain diffidence about coupling my name with his on the title-page of this second project of ours. At the time of his death he was busy revising my draft of certain of the chapters, but much of the material he never had

an opportunity to work upon, and some of it not even to see. On the other hand, there are touches in the text as it now stands that are entirely Sidgwick. To take those to myself and issue them as my own would be a sorry sort of plagiarism.

This book is somewhat different in scope from *The Making of Verse*. There we were able to define and describe all the common English metres and some of the less common. It is fairly easy to be comprehensive over metres. But how can one hope to touch more than the fringe of the tremendous variegated fabric that is English prose? I want to make it quite clear that what we are setting before you now is not a complete guide to English prose, but chapters and exercises designed to show you what, as a writer of prose, you may do and what you may not. There are examples too of good and bad writing; and if, having read these, you are stimulated by what we say to write better than some of your fellows, I hope you will feel that the book has justified its existence, and perhaps even its purchase.

R. S.

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## PROSE AND YOU

If you want a text for all that follows we will take it from a speech delivered not very long ago to a school audience: “. . . it is a singular thing that in my time at the R.A.F. Staff College we had to spend an enormous amount of time not doing military things but teaching grown-up chaps to write ordinary simple English. It is horrifying. I hope that is not going to happen to you, because we have not got time to waste teaching chaps like you what you ought to have learnt here. So get on with it. . . .”

We are going to try to help you to write ordinary simple English. We presume you need help, otherwise this book would hardly be in your hands. And nearly all of us do.

There is, however, another tremendous reason for giving more than a passing thought to what you write. The making of prose is a necessity, a civil obligation upon us all, like rendering first aid and assisting the police in the capture of felons; but it can also be a pleasure.

A friend of ours was once looking at a picture in his mother's drawing-room which he had not seen there before. Perhaps his expression gave him away, for his mother said quickly and apologetically: “Yes, it is another of my efforts. I know they are not very good. But I enjoy doing them.”



*I enjoy doing them.* Chesterton once said in his characteristically paradoxical way that if a thing is worth doing at all it is worth doing badly. By this he did not mean that one should pat oneself on the back for being a happy and contented blunderer with pen or brush or even putter. He meant something akin to Stevenson's *to travel hopefully is better than to arrive*. Our words and phrases are very telling. Writing may be a hobby or it may be a profession. It is also a pursuit.

Pursuit of what? That depends. But first and foremost of the power to say what one wants to say in the most suitable language.

It sounds easy. You have probably lived long enough to know only too well that it is not. Writing demands extreme toil, and you may be inclined to wonder where the pleasure comes in. Ask any professional author. He may repudiate the suggestion that there is any pleasure to be got from the process of finding words for his thoughts; but he will not be telling the truth. Every craftsman worthy of the name spends his working life acquiring a technique. He may never be satisfied. He should never be satisfied. But he progresses. Certain powers come to him with practice, and those powers give him satisfaction.

It is not true that practice makes perfect, but it is true that without practice one cannot hope to improve.

What are we to practise upon? Anything and everything. Many professional writers keep a journal, not because the record of the day's work and play is intrinsically of any particular value, but for the material it offers them: things seen, people, ideas, adventures, trivial or otherwise.

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We presume that you also need practice and material to practise upon, and seeing that one has to start somewhere (and in the making of prose there is neither beginning nor end), let us start with the last of these . . . adventures, trivial or otherwise.

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## CHAPTER I

### DESCRIPTION

#### I. Adventures

There are many reasons why people set themselves to the deliberate artistic act of writing, but one of the commonest is to enable their friends—or possibly the world in general—to share their experiences. Experiences, endurances, adventures are the main standby of journalists and lecturers and most novelists, but most people have at one time or another enjoyed or endured experiences which they have longed to be able to describe to their friends with professional accomplishment. Possibly it is the friends more than they themselves who deplore the absence of that accomplishment. We all admire the man who has lived through exciting times, but we think less of him if after it all he can do no better than: "Oh yes, I was through the San Francisco earthquake. . . . What was it like? . . . Well, it was pretty awful."

Nor have we much use for the friend who chanced to give a famous film-star a lift when her car had broken down, and when asked to tell us all about it merely observes, "She was awfully pretty."

It is useful to be able to describe film-stars and other things—to describe them vividly, that is, and not merely to allude to them: to satisfy curiosity as well as to excite it—because by doing so you make yourself better company for your fellows, and may be of some service to the community. You may find, of course, that your innate powers of description are such that



you have only to speak, or put pen to paper, to keep your family and friends purring with amazed delight. If so, you have nothing to learn from this book: go your way, and may life grant you plenty of audiences and paper and ink, and adventures in keeping with your talent. You are a great fellow—and you are very, very rare.

Ordinary mortals are in a different class. We cannot, at once and without effort, give an accurate and vivid account of our actions. Asked in the witness-box to explain how we spent the day before yesterday, we should cut a sorry figure. And only too often, when anything unusual does happen to us, our friends are told about it in this sort of way:

Funny thing happened to me last night. I woke up at half-past two. I don't know why. I mean to say, I don't usually. Must have been something I had eaten. The camembert, I expect. It is always inclined to be too much for me, camembert is. I know it was half-past two, d'you see, because I always keep my watch by my bedside, and I remember saying to myself, "Goodness, it's half-past two." That was after I had switched the light on. It has luminous hands, the watch I mean, but they don't help much. I had to switch the light on because I thought I heard sounds coming from outside the window of the room next mine—funny scratchy sounds. Of course at that hour of the night I was perfectly convinced that it was somebody trying to break in. I got out of bed and looked out, but I couldn't see anything. I literally couldn't see anything much because it was a pitch-dark night. No moon or anything, if you see what I mean. I could just make out the casement of the window. All our windows are casement windows. It was open, but there was nothing suspicious about that. I mean to say, all our windows usually are open at night—upstairs, that is.

"Well, to cut a long story short, I couldn't see or hear

anything that could possibly be a cat-burglar. So I went back to bed. I wasn't feeling very sleepy, I suppose, because of the camembert; and as I lay there, counting sheep, you know, and thinking of one thing and another, I heard the sounds again. Ah, thought I, so there is someone about who shouldn't be. He must have taken cover when I put the light on, and now I have switched it off again (I had when I got back into bed) he is getting on with the job. Though why on earth, thought I, he should want to break into *our* house, goodness knows. The only things we have of any value are the earrings my wife was left by an aunt whose husband had made a lot of money out of tomatoes, and they were in the bank. The earrings, I mean, not the tomatoes. Of course, as I said to myself, a burglar couldn't be expected to know that. I suppose burglars often don't know what chances there are of a profitable haul. It sounded as if our one—what I thought was our one—was cutting round a pane of glass. I mean to say, there was a scratchy sort of sound going on all the time. Now, all our windows are casements—I told you so, didn't I? But—and this is the point—I had just seen that the one the sounds were coming from was open. Open! So I began to wonder why anyone should want to cut out a pane from the casement when there was nothing to prevent him from climbing straight in. You see what I mean? The noises went on, and I lay there wondering what on earth to do. The room that I thought was being feloniously entered was the spare room. When I say *was* I mean of course it still is. An aunt of my wife's was sleeping there. She's staying with us just now. Not the one whose husband grew tomatoes. She's dead, or my wife wouldn't have her earrings. Well, I didn't like to disturb the old lady, especially as she has a weak heart, and any sudden shock is supposed to be bad for her. Bound to be so, you know, if one has a weak heart, though I must say she always looks as strong as a horse to me. Good colour, I mean, though they do say that isn't everything. . . .



By this time anyone who happens still to be listening has lost all interest in the mysterious noises, which, after another quarter of an hour's narration, turn out to be caused by a loose strand of wire, left there unwittingly by the man himself, after he had been tying up the creeper, and now swaying in the wind. He had forgotten to mention the wind.

The whole anecdote can be condensed into:

Had an alarm last night. Thought I heard a burglar. Turned out to be a loose strand of wire tapping on the window-pane in the wind. Sounded just like a man trying to force an entry. Glad I didn't rouse the occupant of the room, an old lady with a bad heart. Shock might have seriously affected her.

That is all the woolly-minded camembert-addict need have said. And even this may seem to you too much. Why relate the incident at all? All that fuss about a loose end of wire! But the real trouble is, not that there is one loose end, but that the whole story is loose ends.

The narrator strays through an accumulation of irrelevant detail until he reaches his wife's aunt's husband's tomatoes. What he ought to have described, if he wanted to make an effective story, is the suspense he felt, his apprehensions, his growing sense, under the ominous recurrence of that curious squeaky little sound, that there was something wrong.

You may well say that the anecdote is pointless, meaning that when the point comes it is a trivial one. But really exciting stories of suspense have been written round incidents that have sprung from causes no less trivial. Read:

Edgar Allan Poe: *The Premature Burial*.

Rudyard Kipling: *My Own True Ghost Story* (in *Wee Willie Winkie*).

H. G. Wells: *The Red Room*.

The last of these stories ends:

"There is neither ghost of earl nor ghost of countess in that room; there is no ghost there at all; but worse, far worse. . . ."

"Well?" they said.

"The worst of all the things that haunt poor mortal man," said I, "and that is, in all its nakedness—Fear!"

EXERCISE 1. Keeping strictly to the circumstances of the above Mysterious Noise anecdote, retell the incident in such a way as to give proper emphasis to the feeling of suspense which it should inspire. Write (a) in the first person, (b) in the third person.

EXERCISE 2. Recount any experience you have had of a Strange Noise in the Middle of the Night.

You may protest that you have never had an experience of the sort. If so, it becomes necessary for you to invent one. A story-teller is not on oath; he is at liberty to draw on his imagination in order to make his tale more entertaining. But when he is doing so he should make it quite clear that what he is writing is fiction and not fact. The composer of highly fictitious "true-to-life" stories is almost bound to be caught out sooner or later. So we will call this:

EXERCISE 3. Compose as thrilling a story as your imagination can devise, with the title: *The Noise at 2.30 a.m.*



## 2. View-points

Of everything that happens in this world there are just as many view-points as there are people involved. This is almost a platitude, but it is apt to be forgotten.

In each of the exercises which follow, a set of circumstances has to be redescribed from different points of view. This is good practice, for it should teach you just how different those points of view may be: a lesson many of us learn only after a serious motor accident or a surprising election result. It demands from you, in addition, the power to visualise the scene in all its completeness. You have to imagine that you are first one of the participants, then another, then—it may be—an eye-witness who has taken no part in the incident. This requires imagination, the special roving-eye imagination of the novelist or film-producer: a thing not to be despised. But remember, you can only learn to describe vividly things you have not seen or experienced by practising first upon things with which you are familiar.

### EXERCISE 4.

#### AIR LINER MISHAP AT CROYDON

#### Safe Landing on One Wheel

(From Our Correspondent)

Croydon, Feb. 14

A British Airways liner suffered a slight mishap here this afternoon when the pilot was forced to land on one wheel after having flown from Paris with seven passengers.

When he arrived at Croydon the pilot tried to lower the retracted landing wheels of the aeroplane by the hydraulic mechanism. When that failed to work properly he tried

the hand mechanism, which also failed to complete its task. The aeroplane circled the aerodrome for one hour and twenty-five minutes while the other two members of the crew—the first officer and the wireless operator—attempted to work the under-carriage gear by hand. Meanwhile fire engines and ambulances, belonging to the aerodrome and from local stations, stood by.

Shortly after four o'clock the pilot wirelessly to Croydon saying that he was running short of petrol and would have to land. The aeroplane approached the aerodrome with one wheel fully down in the landing position but with the other wheel only halfway down. The liner touched down when travelling at about 90 miles an hour, and the wheel which was halfway down immediately collapsed. The aeroplane swung round on the other wheel and the opposite wing-tip until the nose was facing in the direction from which the aeroplane had come.

(a) Write a description of this incident in the form of a minute-to-minute diary, kept by one of the passengers from the moment he or she discovers something is wrong, till the liner is safely down.

(b) A boy has come to welcome home two of the liner's passengers, his parents. You may assume that he has an unobstructed view of the landing. He tells a friend all about it afterwards in a letter. Write the letter.

### EXERCISE 5.

#### LADY EXE'S HOME ON FIRE

##### Remained at Concert

The Countess of Exe was at the concert given last night by the Fresch Quartet at Wigmore Hall, where in an interval an announcement was made from the platform that there was an urgent telephone message for her.

Lady Exe left the hall, but soon returned. She is under-

stood to have said that the evening's music was too good to be missed, and that the conflagration at home must be left to those best fitted to deal with it.

Firemen were called to her home, Exe House, Mayfair. Three motor pumps and three fire-escapes were sent from the nearest stations.

The brigade found that the fire had originated in a room on the first floor used as a dining-room. It spread to the room immediately above, and both these apartments were extensively damaged. Two bedrooms on the second floor were affected by smoke.

The fire was discovered by Miss Staunch, a nursemaid.

Give Miss Staunch's account of the episode, as set down by her (a) in a letter to her mother, written on the following day; (b) in the chapter "Alarums and Excursions" of her book of memoirs: *A Nursemaid in Mayfair*, written five years later.

## EXERCISE 6.

### "TAKING AWAY A BUS" CHARGE

#### Man mistaken for a learner

A man who was stated to have taken an unattended London bus "just to drive himself home" was remanded in bail of £10 at Lambeth yesterday.

The charge against James Johns, 30, private motor driver, of Holmside Street, Peckham, was "taking and driving away a motor-omnibus, value £2000, without consent of the owners, the London Passenger Transport Board."

"Where is the bus?" the Magistrate enquired.

Mr. S. P. Smith, prosecuting for the Board, replied: "The police say on the charge sheet: 'Property found: on person 2s., elsewhere one omnibus.'"

Mr. Smith declared that on Saturday night a No. 4 bus was left outside the Old Kent Road bus garage. It was later seen being driven along Bowles Road.



### Thought he was Learning

A driver named Harmer, who was returning home on foot, jumped on it and took a seat inside. He believed that the driver was a learner preparing for a test.

When he rang the bell to get off, the driver, Johns, also got off, saying to him: "You can have the bus." He then went away.

When interviewed at his home by Det.-Sergt. Warner, Johns said: "I have been waiting for you. I cannot make out what made me do it."

Johns told the court that he had been to a party and on the way home was dared by friends to drive the bus. To show them that he could do so he jumped into the driver's seat and set off, leaving them behind.

You are one of the following: (a) James Johns; (b) the driver named Harmer; (c) an unobserved onlooker. Describe what you saw.

### EXERCISE 7.

#### PILOT FOUGHT SNAKE AT 10,000 FEET

Captain Johnny Seccombe, D.F.C., the Transvaal cricketer, fought a poisonous snake at 10,000 feet while flying through intense flak over enemy territory to-day, says Reuter's special correspondent with a South African Spitfire wing, in a delayed cable.

Seccombe was dodging ack-ack in the course of a big sweep when he saw a three-foot-long snake on the instrument panel.

The reptile struck several times at the embarrassed pilot, who fought back by hitting at it with his gloved hand.

With the snake angrily hissing, the duel continued from an altitude of 10,000 feet until the plane touched down. During the landing the snake coiled round the throttle lever, nearly wrecking the aircraft.

Seccombe, who says he is "terrified of snakes," jumped out of the cockpit and reported the presence of the stow-away. It took the mechanics three hours to get it out.

Captain Seccombe, let us suppose, gives a broadcast talk about his curious passenger. Write the script. Suggested length: 250 words.

### 3. Common Objects

Read Edgar Allan Poe's tale, *A Descent into the Maelstrom*. It concerns a mariner's escape from the depths of this most terrible of whirlpools, and in order to bring home to the readers' imagination just how terrible a thing it is, Poe describes how he was led by the survivor to a point on the Norwegian coast—a lofty and precipitous crag—from which he could look out over the sea and observe the phenomenon during the phase of its greatest activity.

"Do you hear anything?" his guide asks. "Do you see any change in the water?"

. . . As the old man spoke I became aware of a loud and gradually increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie; and at the same moment I perceived that what seamen term the *chopping* character of the ocean beneath us was rapidly changing into a current which set to the eastward. Even while I gazed this current acquired a monstrous velocity. Each moment added to its speed—to its headlong impetuosity. In five minutes the whole sea as far as Vurrgh was lashed into ungovernable fury; but it was between Moskoe and the coast that the main uproar held its sway. Here the vast bed of the waters, seamed and seared into a thousand conflicting channels, burst suddenly into frenzied convulsion—heaving, boiling, hissing—gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes except in precipitous descents.

In a few moments more there came over the scene another radical alteration. The general surface grew somewhat more smooth, and the whirlpools one by one disappeared,



while prodigious streaks of foam became apparent where none had been seen before. These streaks, at length, spreading out to a great distance, and entering into combination, took unto themselves the gyratory motion of the subsided vortices, and seemed to form the germ of another more vast. Suddenly—very suddenly—this assumed a distinct and definite existence in a circle of more than a mile in diameter. The edge of the whirl was represented by a broad belt of gleaming spray; but no particle of this slipped into the mouth of the terrific funnel, whose interior, as far as the eye could fathom it, was a smooth, shining, and jet-black wall of water, inclined to the horizon at an angle of some forty-five degrees, speeding dizzily round and round with a swaying and sweltering motion, and sending forth to the winds an appalling voice, half shriek, half roar, such as not even the mighty cataract of Niagara ever lifts up in its agony to heaven.

You may not ever have occasion to describe anything as unusual as this, but from time to time you will almost certainly have to explain the nature and function of quite ordinary things, and this equally requires thought.

Remember that a horse is no easier to describe than a unicorn, and that if you cannot describe a horse with a reasonable amount of skill, you will make a poor job of the rarer beast. So, before we go any further:

**EXERCISE 8.** Describe the animal which is known to us as *The Horse*.

Remember too that much of the writing that men of to-day have to do concerns clothing coupons and income-tax appeals and football rules and many other similar things, all of which promote wrath or letters to the papers or at the very least a pitiful perplexity, unless the information about them is adequately imparted.

The gift of lucid explanation is not to be despised. In the ordinary everyday world of keeping the wolf from the door the appetite for romance is as nothing to the hunger for plain statement, unvarnished, unadorned, crystal clear. Do not therefore grumble if we ask you to study, as an exercise in simple description, the best way to describe *A Match-box*.

#### EXERCISE 9.

Close the book, and write a description of *A Match-box* in 150 to 200 words. Having done that, consider this attempt:

*A Match-box*. . . . The commonest type, as used in thousands of households, is that which contains the "safety" match. In the popular size this is about 2 inches long,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches broad, and  $\frac{5}{8}$  inch deep: larger and smaller sizes are also made. The "box" consists of a tray (containing the unused matches) sliding in a cover open at both ends; both are made of very thin wood covered with thin paper. (The bottom of the tray, when made of wood, tends to split; an improved kind is now made of cardboard.) The smaller sides ( $2\text{ inches} \times \frac{5}{8}\text{ inch}$ ) of the cover have rough surfaces prepared with chemical paste, so that when a match-head is rubbed or drawn across them the match-head bursts into flame. On the paper covering of the larger sides of the cover is usually printed the name of the match, the manufacturer, etc.

For the non-safety type of match (which will strike on any roughened surface, or even glass), boxes are made on similar principles, so far as the handy pocket size of box is concerned; larger quantities are put up in tin boxes, useful for tourists, campers, and explorers.

Notice that in this description of a match-box the writer has been careful to begin by stating the *kind* of match-box he is attempting to describe. Of the *genus* "match-box" he deals with a single *species*, the com-



monest, in detail; and then shows that he is aware of other species also comprised by the generic term.

Sometimes the word you are asked to describe may be one which has a number of different meanings. Of three boys in a class asked to describe "a flag," one described the Union Jack, another a flagstone and a third the garden iris. What should they have done? They should each have made it clear that there were other kinds of "flag" besides the kind being described; if time and space permitted they should have described these other kinds as well.

**EXERCISE 10.** Describe a corkscrew.

First let us consider carefully the following three attempts at such a description:

1. A corkscrew is a piece of metal in the form of a wide spiral used for drawing out corks. It is usually made of cast iron of about the same diameter as a long nail. One end of the spiral is practically straightened out into a point, and at the other end a crosspiece, generally of wood, is attached to form a handle. The pointed end is inserted into the cork and the handle turned in the direction which will twist the spiral into the cork. As soon as the spiral has sufficient grip, the cork can be drawn out.

2. The man who invented screws was a genius, but the man who invented the corkscrew was more than a genius: he is the doctor of thirsty people. The object of a corkscrew is to draw the cork out of a bottle before partaking of the contents thereof. The action is like that of a screw: indeed the corkscrew itself looks like a screw. It consists of a wooden handle with a piece of metal protruding vertically downwards out of it. Now this piece of metal is like a spring that has been elongated and has forgotten to spring back again. You push the end of this down into the cork and twist and twist and . . . When only a little



of the metal is left, you pull, and plop! out comes the cork. And then, gurgle . . . gurgle . . .

3. A corkscrew is the more scientific instrument than two pen-knives, or, failing either, breaking the neck of the bottle, for reaching the liquid contained inside corked bottles, which are usually coloured green. The bottles in question are sealed with a piece of soft wood-bark called cork, which is rammed well into the neck of the bottle, the top being finished off flush with the bottle. The problem is to remove the cork so that the contents of the bottle may be enjoyed without breaking the cork or driving it right into the bottle.

The problem is solved by means of a corkscrew. It looks rather like a gimlet, having a right-hand screw thread about three inches long, terminating in a point. This is made of metal and is usually brightly polished. Opposite to the pointed end is fixed a handle at right angles to the screw thread, and forming the cross-piece of the letter T. The handle is usually made of wood. To use the implement, the offending bottle is taken firmly in the left hand, and the corkscrew is seized by the handle in the right. The point of the screw is then placed exactly in the centre of the cork, and the corkscrew is turned in a clockwise direction, pressing down into the cork the whole time. Turning is continued until the screw thread is right into the cork. The bottle is then placed between the legs, and a steady pressure upwards applied to the handle of the corkscrew; if the operation has been carried out successfully, the operator is rewarded with an encouraging "pop," and he may now enjoy himself. The cork is now taken in the left hand and the corkscrew in the right hand; the corkscrew is turned in an anti-clockwise direction, and in this way the cork is released from the corkscrew, the former for use if anything is left, the latter if the thirst is still unquenched.

Now try your hand at it. Remember that, though two of the above attempts connect corkscrews only

with thirst, bottles do sometimes contain (a) cod-liver oil, (b) ammonia, (c) ink.

EXERCISE 11. Describe a pair of scissors.

We will again begin by considering several actual attempts—or failures.

1. A pair of scissors consists of two knives rotating on a cog.

2. A pair of scissors is an instrument which is used for cutting paper, cardboard, cloth, hair and fingernails.

3. Pairs of scissors exist in many forms: curved narrow blades for manicuring; long, thick blades for tailoring; squat handy ones for everyday use. They are invariably made of metal. The expensive ones are of gold or silver, and the cheapest chromium-plated or bare iron.

4. A pair of scissors is an instrument for cutting. It consists of two metal blades with handles attached. The two blades are fixed by means of a screw through their centres so that the one will turn on the other. When closed the two blades overlap and fit close together. The article to be cut is placed between the blades when they are open, and the blades are then closed upon it. Scissors are made of steel, usually with a silver finish. The blades are sharpened so that one side is flat and the other bevelled. In the closed position the two flat sides are together.

5. A pair of scissors is an instrument used for cutting common objects. They vary in size. Some are three inches long, some nine inches. The instrument consists of two parts, which are exactly similar in the majority of cases. There is a blade about half the length of one part; this becomes round and blunt, and then ends in a ring the diameter of which is about the diameter of a person's finger. The two pieces of steel are placed on top of each other, and one of them is rotated through  $180^\circ$ . They

are then screwed together and the machine is produced. Sometimes the size of one ring varies so as to allow more than one finger to hold it. The two blades are as near as possible together. It is when they come together that they cut the object in two.

EXERCISE 12. Estimate the comparative value of the foregoing descriptions.

N.B.—In No. 1, are the words *knives*, *rotating* and *cog* the ones you would choose?

Do Nos. 2 and 3 tell you how the instrument works?

If you were explaining the action of scissors to a savage and had not a specimen pair with you, would you use No. 4 or No. 5?

EXERCISE 13. Practise your powers of description on one or more of the following:

Egg	Soda-water siphon	Pencil
See-saw	Tennis racket	Hammer
Sponge	Postage stamp	Ladder
Pillar-box	Lawn-mower	Safety-pin
Collar-stud	Hair-brush	Deck-chair
Pair of spectacles	Safety-razor	Thermometer
Umbrella	Watering-can	Fishing-rod

Most of the foregoing objects are manufactures, but two are natural products. In describing anything made for a certain purpose it is a good plan to think first what the purpose is, and build your description round that.

For instance: what is the ordinary purpose of the common pencil? By *pencil* we mean a handy instrument for making a mark on any surface that will take it. What makes the mark? The core of the instrument—the graphite or coloured chalk. Why is this core encased in wood or other material? To pre-



vent breakage, to keep the fingers clean . . . and so on.

Here is a brilliant example, a thumbnail sketch of a *bicycle*, by Bernard Shaw:

I acquired a habit: the habit of balancing myself on a bar moving rapidly forward on two wheels tracking in tandem, the front wheel being deflectable.

(Preface to *Man and Superman*)

How lively that is! And why? Because G.B.S. gets straight to the essential working features of the machine: the principle of balance, wheels in tandem, and the pivoted front wheel that secures stability and steering. The thing is in motion.

Notice in particular the word *deflectable*. To praise Bernard Shaw for using the right word in the right place would be like complimenting your dentist on drawing the right tooth: it would be an insult not to expect it. If you doubt whether it is the right and only word, you had better suggest one as good to take its place.

When you are writing descriptions of this kind—indeed, in any writing—*be careful to see that the words you use really convey the impression you intend*. It sounds obvious, but look back at Scissors, 1. The word that is not just right may be very wrong indeed.

Bernard Shaw pictures in twenty words the main principles of the bicycle and its structure. He does not proceed to describe the motive power; but the principle holds good for the velocipede, which men drove, straddling, by pushing the ground with their feet, before the days of pedals, cranks and chain. These would be the next things to describe; then the handle-bars (levers to deflect the front wheel), controls such

as brakes, accessories such as bell, lamp and toolbag; and finally luxuries such as shock-absorbing tyres, speedometers and little oil baths.

That is the way it should be done: essentials first, accessories second, excrescences last. It shows method, and a proper sense of the comparative importance of the parts to the function that the machine has to perform.

*Work outwards*, then: think first of what is absolutely essential to a bicycle (or a corkscrew or a pair of scissors), and secondly of the improvements which have been added to make it function better.

Only too often in these tests one is given a "description" which is not really a description at all, but an inventory. It is like one of those displays occasionally seen in shop-windows, of all the separate parts of a clock or a bicycle, complete, no doubt, and impressive enough when arranged in a nice pattern, under glass, but not the least use to anyone wanting to know how the parts are put together, or why, when put together, they act as they do.

When you have finished your description, read it through and ask yourself whether any part of the statement you have made can possibly be misunderstood; for the world abounds with fools who will do what they can to misunderstand you.

Of these fools the commonest kinds, you will discover, are:

(1) the humorous fool, who, on being told that a pillar-box is round and red, would have one believe that he thinks it to be something very like a tomato.

(2) the stupid fool, who, having got it into his head that

oscillations belong to wireless sets, cannot understand what they have to do with the pendulum of a grandfather clock;

(3) and worst of all, the ingenious fool, who refutes your statement that the motor-car is a four-wheeled vehicle by pointing to the spare wheel, or when told that locomotives run on steam or oil remarks that he thought they ran on rails.

It is up to you to outwit the lot—by lucidity, by exact statement, by a determination not to mislead. To be fool-proof and concise means that you must endeavour to be as clever as your cleverest reader, and as stupid as your stupidest.

We cannot do better than conclude this section with an extract from one of Hilaire Belloc's essays. (Read any and every essay of his when you get the chance.)

. . . Ropes more than any other subject are, I think, a test of a man's power of exposition in prose. If you can describe clearly without a diagram the proper way of making this or that knot, then you are a master of the English tongue. You are not only a master—you are a sign, a portent, a new discoverer, an exception among your fellow men, a unique fellow. For no one yet in this world surely has attained to lucidity in this most difficult branch of all expression. I find over and over again in the passages of those special books which talk of ropes, such language as "This is a very useful knot and is made as follows: a bight is taken in the standing part and is then run over right-handedly, that is with the sun or, again, the hands of a watch (only backward), and then under the running part and so through both times and hauled tight by the free end." But if any man should seek to save his life on a dark night in a sudden gust of wind by this description he would fail; he would drown.

Take the simplest of them. Take the Clove Hitch. Write a sentence in English which will explain (without a



picture) how to cast a Clove Hitch. I do not think you will succeed.

Hilaire Belloc: *On a Piece of Rope*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* attempts it as follows:

A "hitch" or mode of simply fastening a rope round a spar, etc., formed by passing the rope twice round in such a way that both ends pass under the centre part of the loop in front; it thus appears united into one loop in front and cloven into two parallel lines at the back.

Two other books consulted: *The Wolf Cub's Handbook* and *Yachting*, by Bullen and Prout, wisely use diagrams.

#### 4. A Question of Scale

If you want to study the art of description you cannot do better than look at almost any page of *Gulliver's Voyages to Lilliput or Brobdingnag*. Swift had set himself no easy task. He sends Gulliver first to a country where everything is on a far smaller scale than himself, then to a country where everything is on a far larger scale than himself. It is not simply first dwarfs then giants. Everything in Lilliput is dwarfish, *to an exact linear scale of one inch to a foot*. Everything in Brobdingnag is gigantic, *to an exact linear scale of one foot to an inch*. These proportions are faithfully observed throughout.

The inventory of Gulliver's possessions taken by the command of the Emperor shortly after his discovery in Lilliput shows Swift's grasp of detail and ability to see everything through the minds of natives who are ignorant and amazed but not unintelligent.

Here are the Lilliputian descriptions of Gulliver's property.

### His watch :

Out of the right fob hung a great silver chain, with a wonderful kind of engine at the bottom. We directed him to draw out whatever was fastened to that chain; which appeared to be a globe, half silver, and half of some transparent metal; for, on the transparent side, we saw certain strange figures circularly drawn, and thought we could touch them, till we found our fingers stopped by that lucid substance. He put this engine to our ears, which made an incessant noise like that of a water-mill. And we conjecture it is either some unknown animal, or the god that he worships; but we are more inclined to the latter opinion, because he assured us that he seldom did anything without consulting it.

### Handkerchief:

a great piece of coarse cloth, large enough to be a foot-cloth for your Majesty's chief room of state.

### Snuff-box :

a huge silver chest, with a cover of the same metal, which we, the searchers, were not able to lift. We desired it should be opened, and one of us, stepping into it, found himself up to the mid leg in a sort of dust, some part whereof, flying up to our faces, set us both a-sneezing for several times together.

### Pistols :

a hollow pillar of iron, about the length of a man, fastened to a strong piece of timber, larger than the pillar; and upon one side of the pillar were huge pieces of iron sticking out, cut into strange figures, which we know not what to make of. In the left pocket, another engine of the same kind.

### Purse :

a net almost large enough for a fisherman, but contrived to



open and shut like a purse and served him for the same use: we found therein several massy pieces of yellow metal, which, if they be real gold, must be of immense value.

Incidents from *Gulliver's Voyage to Brobdingnag*:

I should have lived happy enough in that country, if my littleness had not exposed me to several ridiculous and troublesome accidents: some of which I shall venture to relate. Glumdalclitch often carried me into the gardens of the court in my smaller box, and would sometimes take me out of it and hold me in her hand, or set me down to walk. I remember, before the dwarf left the Queen, he followed us one day into those gardens, and my nurse having set me down, he and I being close together, near some dwarf apple-trees, I must needs show my wit by a silly allusion between him and the trees, which happens to hold in their language as it doth in ours. Whereupon, the malicious rogue watching his opportunity, when I was walking under one of them, shook it directly over my head, by which a dozen apples, each of them near as large as a Bristol barrel, came tumbling about my ears; one of them hit me on the back as I chanced to stoop, and knocked me down flat on my face, but I received no other hurt, and the dwarf was pardoned at my desire, because I had given the provocation.

Another day Glumdalclitch left me on a smooth grass-plot to divert myself while she walked at some distance with her governess. In the mean time there suddenly fell such a violent shower of hail, that I was immediately by the force of it struck to the ground: and when I was down, the hail-stones gave me such cruel bangs all over the body, as if I had been pelted with tennis-balls; however I made a shift to creep on all four, and shelter myself by lying flat on my face on the lee-side of a border of lemon thyme, but so bruised from head to foot that I could not go abroad in ten days. Neither is this at all to be wondered at, because nature in that country observing the same proportion through all her operations, a hailstone is near eighteen hundred times as large as one in Europe, which I can

assert upon experience, having been so curious to weigh and measure them.

I cannot tell whether I were more pleased or mortified, to observe in those solitary walks, that the smaller birds did not appear to be at all afraid of me, but would hop about within a yard distance, looking for worms, and other food, with as much indifference and security, as if no creature at all were near them. I remember, a thrush had the confidence to snatch out of my hand, with his bill, a piece of cake that Glumdalclitch had just given me for my breakfast. When I attempted to catch any of these birds, they would boldly turn against me, endeavouring to pick my fingers, which I durst not venture within their reach; and then they would hop back unconcerned, to hunt for worms or snails, as they did before. But one day I took a thick cudgel, and threw it with all my strength so luckily at a linnet, that I knocked him down, and seizing him by the neck with both my hands, ran with him in triumph to my nurse. However, the bird, who had only been stunned, recovering himself, gave me so many boxes with his wings on both sides of my head and body, though I held him at arm's length, and was out of the reach of his claws, that I was twenty times thinking to let him go. But I was soon relieved by one of our servants, who wrung off the bird's neck, and I had him next day for dinner, by the Queen's command. This linnet, as near as I can remember, seemed to be somewhat larger than an English swan.

The idea of the new terrors lying in a man's path when sinister changes occur in the proportion of things is brilliantly taken up by H. G. Wells in *The Food of the Gods*.

The Food was a discovery of two research-dietitians who were anxious to speed up the natural processes of growth. They took a small farm so that they could make experiments on livestock. At last, after several failures, they succeeded in producing chickens that were unquestionably outsize. But the married couple



who were left in charge were careless and untidy in their habits. Some of the precious food was left lying about in tins with the lids off, where the wasps could get at it. . . .

The first wasp to be brought down, with a double-barrelled gun, was found to measure "twenty-seven and a half inches across its open wings, and its sting was three inches long." The length of the creature from head to sting was eighteen inches.

No Brobdingnagian wasp would have been more than a foot long, unless it were a queen. Gulliver finds a few passes with his sword sufficient to drive one of them away. The Food of the Gods had greater powers of magnification.

There was one victim, a grocer, who discovered one of these monsters in a sugar-cask and very rashly attacked it with a spade as it rose. He struck it to the ground for a moment, and it stung him through the boot as he struck at it again and cut its body in halves. He was first dead of the two.

Then there were the rats . . .

EXERCISE 14. Using your memory, if you have read *The Food of the Gods*, or your imagination, if you have not, record other consequences of the carelessness of the guardians of the miraculous food.

Before attempting any further exercises in story-telling "to scale," consider the following episode:

#### A SCHOLARSHIP CANDIDATE FROM BROBDINGNAG

My father having decided that I should try for a scholarship at Cotsall College, I set sail towards the middle of June. Owing to the large draught of our ship we were unable to approach within some distance of the coast. Since it was

summer and the weather was warm, I decided to swim. It was some time before arrangements could be made for all shipping to be warned, but eventually I was able to start. I was well accustomed to swimming long distances and although the water was cold I reached the coast, a distance of some hundred miles, in about eight hours. Being small for my age I was only about sixty feet tall, so I was able to travel by railway to Cotsall.

For this purpose a special carriage had been constructed on which I lay for my eighty miles to Cotsall. When I arrived at the station there was a delay. The station master would not risk what might happen at the arrival platform if I alighted there, and the train was therefore drawn up outside. I was welcomed by the Mayor, with whom I was able to talk by lifting him upon the palm of my hand. In this way I also spoke with several others, including the Headmaster of the College, who informed me that owing to the difficulty of providing me with sleeping accommodation I was to use an empty airship hangar near the town. He asked me to exercise extreme care when walking in the streets, and told me that I must on no account take up in my hand anyone I saw about. He warned me also to be particularly careful where I put my feet when I was in the College grounds.

Thanks to some Government surplus blankets and mattresses which had been provided by the Bursar of the College, I spent a comfortable enough night in my hangar. The next morning I returned to Cotsall. The weather being fine, it had been arranged that I should do the papers in the open air. It was obviously impossible for me to sit with the other candidates in the Big Schoolroom, so I knelt on the grass and used the roof of it as my desk. The Bursar had had it strengthened for the occasion, as he was afraid my pen might penetrate it. The paper on which I was to write had been supplied by the *Cotsall Chronicle* and was in a roll about two miles long and ten feet broad. I had brought my own pen with me, for I had foreseen the difficulty there might be in providing me with one. The ink, however, was supplied in a rain-water

tank, which the master invigilating the exam refilled during the morning by means of a stirrup-pump.

After two hours the invigilator rolled up my length of manuscript as best he could, and I was told that I could go to the quadrangle for cocoa and buns; which I did. I was pained later to hear that the trayful of buns and jugs of cocoa had not all been intended for me.

After two days of examinations I returned to Brobdingnag and I am now waiting for the results to be published. They generally appear more promptly, but the masters who have to correct the papers are no doubt not used to perusing some miles of inch script.

**EXERCISE 15.** The Candidate from Brobdingnag is successful and goes to Cotsall College. Continue his adventures there.

**EXERCISE 16.** The Cotsall College Playground Committee think it would be interesting to have some kind of fixture with Lilliput's chief boarding-school at Mildendo. They decide to invite teams from Mildendo College to compete with Cotsall in two contests: (a) Diving and (b) Gymnastics. Describe these contests.

**EXERCISE 17.** Describe the Queen's Dolls' House, the Model Village at Bourton-on-the-Water, the Rye-Dymchurch Light Railway, or, if you have seen none of these things, the most elaborate scale-model fabrication that you have seen.

**EXERCISE 18.** If you could construct a model railway regardless of cost, explain how you would do it.

### 5. People

If you ask a friend what some person, known to you only by name, is like, he may give you a complete



dossier-like report of that person; but it is more probable that he will answer you in one of two ways. Either he will say (for instance): "fat and bald, with a red handle-bars moustache, generally wearing green plus-fours and a purple pork pie, with some jay's feathers on the port side, also almost always a Gunners' tie." Or he will say (for instance, again): "I don't like him much: he is a bully, disloyal to his friends and a malicious gossip . . ."; or "I like him very much indeed: he is the soul of generosity and a highly intelligent man."

In other words, when you are describing people you may concentrate on their appearance or on their character. The really complete report will describe both: the "pen-portrait" will be also a character-sketch.

Literature having as its main function the revelation of human character, it is only natural that there should be in ours many good examples of portrait-penning. On the other hand, it is not always easy to find an author's "portrait" contained in a mere paragraph or two. The novelist, the historian, the biographer and to a lesser extent the essayist are concerned with character *in action*. In their studies of people, circumstance and comment are interwoven. The anecdote, the eye-witness's impression, the casual repartee may be more illuminating than an author's remarks, for all the research and reflection that lie behind them. Consider this when you are examining the examples which follow.

In this matter of appearance and character, there may be in the description a reference to some action on the part of the subject which reveals his or her

personality. There may simply be a noting down of what seem to be merely superficial points of appearance. But are they merely superficial? Perhaps some society gossip meets a distinguished conductor and has nothing more valuable to tell us about him than that he has eyes differing in colour, the one from the other, and an imperial. The imperial *may* be symptomatic, but we are dissatisfied if our informant leaves it at that.

Trivial things should only be mentioned if they are revealing. And revealing they can be. You probably remember the famous dissertation on a "battered billycock" by Sherlock Holmes which begins with the great detective

lounging upon the sofa in a purple dressing-gown, a pipe-rack within his reach upon the right, and a pile of crumpled morning papers, evidently newly studied, near at hand. Beside the couch was a wooden chair, and on the angle of the back hung a very seedy and disreputable hard felt hat, much the worse for wear, and cracked in several places. A lens and a forceps lying upon the seat of the chair suggested that the hat had been suspended in this manner for the purpose of examination.

Sherlock Holmes begs his friend Watson to look upon the hat "not as a battered billycock, but as an intellectual problem." Holmes's working out of the problem is given on page 33. Biographers are generally more fortunate than Sherlock Holmes. They start with the hat *and* the man. It is not necessary for them to deduce character from appearance. But the greater their knowledge of the man, the greater will be the discernment with which they can view, and record, his appearance. Consider, for



instance, this portrait of the poet Coleridge by Thomas Carlyle, which will be found in his *Life of John Sterling*:

The good man, he was now getting old, towards sixty perhaps; and gave you the idea of a life that had been full of sufferings; a life heavy-laden, half-vanquished, still swimming painfully in the seas of manifold physical and other bewilderment. Brow and head were round, and of massive weight, but the face was flabby and irresolute. The deep eyes, of a light hazel, were as full of sorrow as of inspiration; confused pain looked mildly from them, as in a kind of mild astonishment. The whole figure and air, good and amiable otherwise, might be called flabby and irresolute; expressive of weakness under possibility of strength. He hung loosely on his limbs, with knees bent, and stooping attitude; in walking, he rather shuffled than decisively stepped; and a lady once remarked, he never could fix which side of the garden walk would suit him best, but continually shifted, in cork-screw fashion, and kept trying both. A heavy-laden, high-aspiring and surely much-suffering man. His voice, naturally soft and good, had contracted itself into a plaintive snuffle and sing-song; he spoke as if preaching—you would have said, preaching earnestly and also hopelessly and weightiest things. I still recollect his "object" and "subject," terms of continual recurrence in the Kantean province; and how he sang and snuffled them into "om-m-mject" and "sum-m-mject," with a kind of solemn shake or quaver, as he rolled along.

Here is a simpler piece of description, by A. G. Gardiner, journalist, biographer and sometime newspaper editor:

Walking down Fleet Street some day you may meet a form whose vastness blots out the heavens. Great waves of hair surge from under the soft, wide-brimmed hat. A cloak that might be a legacy from Porthos floats about his colossal frame. He pauses in the midst of the pavement to read the book in his hand, and a cascade of laughter descending from the head notes to the middle voice gushes

out on the listening air. He looks up, adjusts his pince-nez, observes that he is not in a cab, remembers that he ought to be in a cab, turns and hails a cab. The vehicle sinks down under the unusual burden and rolls heavily away. It carries Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

At first sight it seems that we are merely being given an amusing glimpse of the outward proportions of this noble man. But look again, there is more in it than that: enough, in fact, to form the basis of:

EXERCISE 19. Explain what qualities in the character of G. K. Chesterton are revealed by this impression of him by A. G. Gardiner.

EXERCISE 20. Read carefully the following description of Frederick the Great by Thomas Carlyle:

He is a king every inch of him, though without the trappings of a king. Presents himself in a Spartan simplicity of vesture: no crown, but an old military cocked-hat—generally old, or tramped and kneaded into absolute *softness*, if new; no sceptre, but one like Agamemnon's, a walking-stick cut from the woods, which serves also as a riding stick (with which he hits the horse "between the ears," say authors); and for royal robes, a mere soldier's blue coat with red facings—coat likely to be old, and sure to have a good deal of Spanish snuff on the breast of it; rest of the apparel dim, unobtrusive in colour or cut, ending in high over-knee military boots, which may be brushed (and, I hope, kept soft with an under-hand suspicion of oil), but are not permitted to be blackened or varnished; Day and Martin with their soot-pots forbidden to approach.

The man is not of god-like physiognomy, any more than of imposing stature or costume; close-shut mouth with thin lips, prominent jaws and nose, receding brow, by no means of Olympian height; head, however, is of long form, and has superlative grey eyes in it. Not what is called a beautiful man; nor yet, by all appearance, what is called a happy.



On the contrary, the face bears evidence of many sorrows, as they are termed, of much hard labour done in this world; and seems to anticipate nothing but more still coming. Quiet stoicism, capable enough of what joy there were, but not expecting any worth mention; great unconscious and some conscious pride, well tempered with a cheery mockery of humour, are written on that old face, which carries its chin well forward, in spite of the slight stoop about the neck; snuffy nose, rather flung into the air, under its old cocked-hat, like an old snuffy lion on the watch; and such a pair of eyes as no man, or lion, or lynx of that century bore elsewhere, according to all the testimony we have. . . .

Most excellent, potent, brilliant eyes, swift-darting as the stars, steadfast as the sun; grey, we said, of the azure-grey colour; large enough, not of glaring size; the habitual expression of them vigilance and penetrating sense, rapidity resting on depth. Which is an excellent combination; and gives us the notion of a lambent outer radiance springing from some great inner sea of light and fire in the man.

The voice, if he speak to you, is of similar physiognomy: clear, melodious, and sonorous, all tones are in it, from that of ingenious inquiry, graceful sociality, light-flowing banter (rather prickly for the most part), up to definite word of command, up to desolating word of rebuke and reprobation: a voice "the clearest and most agreeable in conversation I have ever heard," says witty Dr. Moore. "He speaks a great deal," continues the doctor; "yet those who hear him, regret that he does not speak a good deal more. His observations are always lively, very often just; and few men possess the talent of repartee in greater perfection."

(Exercise 20.) This is a very *methodical* portrait. Clothes, face, eyes, voice . . . you see how he sets it all down.

Write a description of any man or woman that you know, relying, as indeed you must, on the same details, and setting them down in the order adopted by Carlyle.

EXERCISE 21. Give in your own words the substance of the final paragraph, without using the following words: physiognomy, melodious, sonorous, ingenious inquiry, graceful sociality, light-flowing banter, prickly, desolating, reprobation, repartee.

EXERCISE 22. Here are two short impressions, the first of Abraham Lincoln by Walt Whitman, the second of an elderly married couple by their friend Dr. John Brown. Write a comparison of the two in about 200 words, showing what each impression is capable of conveying to the reader, in facts *and* *emotion*.

#### ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The party makes no great show in uniform or horses. Mr. Lincoln on the saddle generally rides a good-sized, easy-going grey horse, is dressed in plain black, somewhat rusty and dusty, and looks about as ordinary in attire, etc., as the commonest man. The entirely unornamental *cortege* arouses no sensation; only some curious stranger stops and gazes. I see very plainly Abraham Lincoln's dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones. Sometimes the President goes and comes in an open barouche. Sometimes one of his sons, a boy of ten or twelve, accompanies him, riding at his right on a pony. They passed me once very close, and I saw the President in the face fully as they were moving slowly, and his look, though abstracted, happened to be directed steadily in my eye. He bowed and smiled, but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there. One of the great portrait painters of two or three centuries ago is needed.

Walt Whitman: *Specimen Days*.



## JAMES AND AILIE

By this time I saw the woman's face; she was sitting on a sack filled with straw, her husband's plaid round her, and his big-coat, with its large white metal buttons, over her feet.

I never saw a more unforgettable face—pale, serious, *lonely*, delicate, sweet, without being at all what we call fine. She looked sixty, and had on a mutch, white as snow, with its black ribbon; her silvery smooth hair setting off her dark-grey eyes—eyes such as one sees only twice or thrice in a lifetime, full of suffering, full also of the overcoming of it: her eyebrows black and delicate, and her mouth firm, patient, and contented, which few mouths ever are.

As I have said, I never saw a more beautiful countenance or one more subdued to a settled quiet. "Ailie," said James, "this is Maister John, the young doctor; Rab's freend, ye ken. We often speak aboot you, doctor." She smiled, and made a movement, but said nothing; and prepared to come down, putting her plaid aside and rising. Had Solomon in all his glory been handing down the Queen of Sheba at his palace gate, he could not have done it more daintily, more tenderly, more like a gentleman, than did James the Howgate carrier, when he lifted down Ailie his wife. The contrast of his small, swarthy, weather-beaten, keen, worldly face to hers—pale, subdued, and beautiful—was something wonderful.

Dr. John Brown: *Rab and his Friends*.

(If you have not read the whole story, read it.)

EXERCISE 23. Examine the following example of Sherlock Holmes's technique, and compose a similar series of deductions based on (a) a boot, and (b) a bicycle. To make the latter of these somewhat easier, there can be revealing objects in the saddle-bag.

## THE BATTERED BILLYCOCK

"Here is my lens. You know my methods. What can

you gather yourself as to the individuality of the man who has worn this article?"

I took the tattered object in my hands and turned it over rather ruefully. It was a very ordinary black hat of the usual round shape, hard and much the worse for wear. The lining had been of red silk, but was a good deal discoloured. There was no maker's name; but, as Holmes had remarked, the initials "H.B." were scrawled upon one side. It was pierced in the brim for a hat-securer, but the elastic was missing. For the rest, it was cracked, exceedingly dusty, and spotted in several places, although there seemed to have been some attempt to hide the discoloured patches by smearing them with ink.

"I can see nothing," said I, handing it back to my friend.

"On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences."

"Then, pray tell me what it is that you can infer from this hat?"

He picked it up, and gazed at it in the peculiar introspective fashion which was characteristic of him. "It is perhaps less suggestive than it might have been," he remarked, "and yet there are a few inferences which are very distinct, and a few others which represent at least a strong balance of probability. That the man was highly intellectual is of course obvious upon the face of it, and also that he was fairly well-to-do within the last three years, although he has now fallen upon evil days. He had foresight, but has less now than formerly, pointing to a moral retrogression, which when taken with the decline of his fortunes, seems to indicate some evil influence, probably drink, at work upon him. This may account also for the obvious fact that his wife has ceased to love him."

"My dear Holmes!"

"He has, however, retained some degree of self-respect," he continued, disregarding my remonstrance. "He is a man who leads a sedentary life, goes out little, is out of training entirely, is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which



he has had cut within the last few days, and which he anoints with lime-cream. These are the more patent facts which are to be deduced from his hat. Also, by the way, that it is extremely improbable that he has gas laid on in his house."

"You are certainly joking, Holmes."

"Not in the least. Is it possible that even now when I give you these results you are unable to see how they are attained?"

"I have no doubt that I am very stupid; but I must confess that I am unable to follow you. For example, how did you deduce that this man was intellectual?"

For answer Holmes clapped the hat upon his head. It came right over the forehead and settled upon the bridge of his nose. "It is a question of cubic capacity," said he; "a man with so large a brain must have something in it."

"The decline of his fortunes, then?"

"This hat is three years old. These flat brims curled at the edge came in then. It is a hat of the very best quality. Look at the band of ribbed silk and the excellent lining. If this man could afford to buy so expensive a hat three years ago, and has had no hat since, then he has assuredly gone down in the world."

"Well, that is clear enough, certainly. But how about the foresight and the moral retrogression?"

Sherlock Holmes laughed. "Here is the foresight," said he, putting his finger upon the little disk and loop of the hat-securer. "They are never sold upon hats. If this man ordered one, it is a sign of a certain amount of foresight, since he went out of his way to take this precaution against the wind. But since we see that he has broken the elastic and has not troubled to replace it, it is obvious that he has less foresight now than formerly, which is a distinct proof of a weakening nature. On the other hand, he has endeavoured to conceal some of these stains upon the felt by daubing them with ink, which is a sign that he has not entirely lost his self-respect."

"Your reasoning is certainly plausible."

"The further points, that he is middle-aged, that his

hair is grizzled, that it has been recently cut, and that he uses lime-cream, are all to be gathered from a close examination of the lower part of the lining. The lens discloses a large number of hair ends, clean cut by the scissors of the barber. They all appear to be adhesive, and there is a distinct odour of lime-cream. This dust, you will observe, is not the gritty, grey dust of the street, but the fluffy brown dust of the house, showing that it has been hung up indoors most of the time; while the marks of moisture upon the inside are proof positive that the wearer perspired very freely, and could, therefore, hardly be in the best of training."

"But his wife—you said that she had ceased to love him."

"This hat has not been brushed for weeks. When I see you, my dear Watson, with a week's accumulation of dust upon your hat, and when your wife allows you to go out in such a state, I fear that you also have been unfortunate enough to lose your wife's affection."

"But he might be a bachelor."

"Nay, he was bringing home the goose as a peace-offering to his wife. Remember the card upon the bird's leg."

"You have an answer to everything. But how on earth do you deduce that the gas is not laid on in the house?"

"One tallow stain, or even two, might come by chance; but when I see no less than five, I think that there can be little doubt that the individual must be brought into frequent contact with burning tallow—walks upstairs at night probably with his hat in one hand and a guttering candle in the other. Anyhow, he never got tallow stains from a gas jet. Are you satisfied?"

A. Conan Doyle: *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: The Blue Carbuncle.*

EXERCISE 24. Compare the following description of Charles Dickens as a young man with the portrait by Daniel Maclise reproduced as a frontispiece. Explain

briefly what the painting tells us about Dickens that the prose passage does not.

#### CHARLES DICKENS AS A YOUNG MAN

A look of youthfulness first attracted you, then a candour and openness of expression which made you sure of the qualities within. The features were very good. He had a capital forehead, a firm nose with full wide nostril, eyes wonderfully beaming with intellect and running over with humour and cheerfulness, and a rather prominent mouth strongly marked with sensibility. The head was altogether well-formed and symmetrical, and the air and carriage of it were extremely spirited. The hair so scant and grizzled in later days was then a rich brown and most luxuriant abundance, and the bearded face of his last two decades had hardly a vestige of hair or whisker; but there was that in the face as I first recollect it which no time could change, and which remained implanted on it unalterably to the last. This was quickness, keenness, and practical power, the eager, restless, energetic outlook on each several feature, that seemed to tell so little of a student or writer of books and so much of a man of action and business in the world. Light and motion flashed from every part of it.

John Forster: *Life of Dickens*.

#### 6. Biography in Brief

Condensation is a difficult art, particularly when it is applied to the lives of the great. There are some interesting specimens to be found on the backs of post-cards published by the National Portrait Gallery.

They vary. Some of them just give the facts baldly, like this:

#### CHARLES DICKENS. 1812-1870

His novels have probably been read by more people than those of any other English writer. After humble



beginnings he found journalistic employment and established his fame in 1836 with *Pickwick Papers*. Visited America in 1842 and 1867-8. Continued his journalistic activities and founded *All the Year Round*. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

The authorities probably felt that this was not good enough. Nothing about his humour; nothing about his warm-hearted championship of the oppressed; nothing about the Charles Dickens that was David Copperfield. He would have been Charles Dickens if he had not visited America at all. And seeing how economical one must be with one's phrases in these biographical miniatures, "found journalistic employment" and "continued his journalistic activities" is hardly showing the right degree of verbal thrift.

Thinking, presumably, that something better could be achieved, the official in charge, in a moment of inspiration, handed the job to those best qualified to execute it: to the professional author or the enlightened admirer. And here are four of the "lives" which now appear with the postcard portrait, each one in itself a little work of art.

W. G. GRACE

The greatest of the world's cricketers: as a batsman supreme, as a bowler great. In his prime he towered above his contemporaries. From 1850 to 1866 the professionals won 23 out of 26 matches against the amateurs; in the next series of 26 matches the amateurs won 19, the professionals one. This remarkable change was entirely due to the black-bearded hero, "W.G." A terror to the bowlers, he was worshipped by the crowd.

R. H. Lyttelton.

Oh yes, there is much here also that we are not told. We do not learn, for instance, what county W.G.



played for. But would it ever have occurred to the author that people did not know? And we do get the greatness of the man put neatly and strikingly before us.

## MRS. BEETON

To four generations of housewives Mrs. Beeton's classic *Book of Household Management* has been a practical guide and daily companion. She married, in 1856, S. O. Beeton, an editor and publisher of exceptional ability; they were mutually helpful in their literary work, and to his inspiration her own book, distinguished by its intellectual and interesting qualities, owes its origin. The mother of four sons, she died aged 28, leaving the memory of a good, lovely, and gifted woman.

Mrs. J. W. Mackail.

This is more chronological than the first, so is the next. But there is an engaging dexterity about them both, and at the beginning of the next a brilliantly descriptive phrase:

## NELSON

This most famous of sea-fighters, the sickly, undersized son of a Norfolk parson, went to sea young and rapidly developed a fiery genius in action which has never been equalled. At St. Vincent (1797), Aboukir (1798), Copenhagen (1801), and Trafalgar (1805) he saved England from invasion and established the imperishable tradition of the "Nelson" touch. Yet his heart was tender as a woman's; no other great leader of men has so definitely ruled by love rather than fear.

Clennell Wilkinson.

We do not want to discourage you, but it is about as easy for a brain to compose one of these as it is for a hand to engrave the Lord's Prayer on a sixpence. One requires a sense of personality, a sense of performance, a sense of phrase. When, added to these,

one gets a sense of humour, one must hail the master-craftsman :

MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS

Daughter of James V of Scotland. Still haunts that country. Thrice married. Mother of James I of England (her poorest achievement). Two more high-mettled ladies than she (the Roman) and Elizabeth (the Protestant) never sat on adjacent thrones. Their duel was for religion, Mary being Elizabeth's heir. At the age of 26 she was imprisoned by Elizabeth for 19 years and then beheaded. It was perhaps necessary for the welfare of Britain that one of them should destroy the other.

The author? E. V. Lucas, in a *Sunday Times* review, bestowed his bouquet with the comment: All Barrie collectors will have to buy this postcard. Bang goes twopence. (I am afraid they may find there has been a post-war increase in price.)

EXERCISE 25. Write short biographies similar to the above of any great man or woman with whose career and achievements you are familiar. For the leading events in the lives of great men and women consult the *Century Dictionary of Names*, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, or any available encyclopaedia.

EXERCISE 26. It is proposed to publish a series of post-card portraits of living celebrities: compose a brief biographical paragraph for the back of the postcard bearing the portrait of the celebrity whom you feel should head the team. (Length: 70-80 words.)

There is another kind of biographical brevity that can be extremely effective: what one may call a snap-shot as opposed to a full-length sketch.

At 12.10 there was a stir at the front door and the

managers dashed to the entrance. They returned in triumph, escorting a small brown gentleman in a brown suit and very white shirt-cuffs. He carried a brown bowler in his left hand and his right was thrust into his waistcoat. The iris of his eyes was entirely surrounded by white, a phenomenon which I had hitherto observed only in the photographs of distinguished mesmerists. He was followed by three or four other gentlemen and two boy-scouts in black shirts. An electric tremor ran through the assembled journalists. "Mussolini," they whispered in amazement. I turned to Allen Leeper. "Really," I remarked, "that was very odd indeed." "It was," he answered.

Harold Nicolson: *Some People*.

EXERCISE 27. Discover and set down biographical "snap-shots" similar to this, mentioning the source—author, title, etc.—from which they come. Search for them (a) in Memoirs and Collections of Letters and (b) in works of fiction.

## 7. Names

Miss Trant was now positive that the little man, the very uneasy little man, was Mr. Eric Tipstead. To begin with, he looked exactly like a Mr. Eric Tipstead.

J. B. Priestley: *The Good Companions*.

People in real life seldom look much like their names, for in this hard world there is not that amount of poetic justice. They are born and assume the names their fathers had before them. They are taken squalling to church and given other names. They grow up, and the names that have so fortuitously come their way may suit them or perchance they may not.

Parents must be prophets if they are to choose suitable Christian names for their children. The power of coincidence alone can secure us the surname we deserve. In this way, as in so many others, fiction is



an improvement upon life. The author is a prophet. If he does not know how his characters are going to turn out he is a pretty poor author. And he has, or should have, coincidence under his control. He may keep strictly to the casual manner of the real world and choose names for his characters from Bradshaw or the London Telephone Book. More probably he will attempt to instil some expressiveness into his choice.

His coinings may be as distinct and forceful as Bunyan's *Mr. Worldly Wiseman*, as grotesque as Swift's *Smelfungus*, as gently satirical as Peacock's pseudonym for Coleridge, *Mr. Flosky*, or as illuminating as Evelyn Waugh's *Lord Parakeet* and *Lady Circumference*. One can not only judge the characters by the names they have been given; one can judge the authors by the way they have responded to their opportunities. A cynical author will accept the practice of the world and make no attempt to distinguish between Messrs. Black and White. But an author who is vigorously conscious of moral distinction will call the blackguard *Sir Mulberry Hawk* and the white man *Cheeryble*, the unscrupulous adventuress *Becky Sharp* and her simple-souled school-fellow *Amelia Sedley*. There may not be much obvious indication of virtue in *Amelia Sedley*, but one feels it would be no more possible for her to behave as *Becky Sharp* behaves than it would be for *Cordelia* to change temperaments with *Goneril*.

Consider the following:

Justice Clement: an old merry magistrate.

Roger Formal: his clerk.

George Downright: a plain squire.

Ben Jonson: *Everyman in his humour*.

Habakkuk Muckleworth : a fanatical preacher.

Scott : *Old Mortality*.

Mr. Sludge : the Medium. Browning : *Dramatis Personae*

Venturewell : a merchant.

Beaumont and Fletcher : *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*.

Mrs. Hawksbee : a busybody.

Kipling : *Plain Tales from the Hills*, etc.

Among the more deliberately suggestive names are :

Thackeray : *Percy Sibwright* (sybarite) ; *The Dorking family* : Henry, Biddy and the little Adelaide (addle-laid).

Anstey : *Mr. Clarence Culchard* ; *Miss Fresia Bludkinson* (reciter).

George du Maurier, *Punch* artist : *Mr. and Mrs. Dedleigh Boreham* ; *Gorgius Midas, Esq.* ; *Jellaby Postlethwaite* (denizens of Victorian drawing-rooms).

Galsworthy : *Forsyte*, family of shrewd Victorian men of property.

Max Beerbohm : *Lord George Hell*, a libertine (*The Happy Hypocrite*).

Dickens went to immense trouble to invent names : e.g. Copperfield (not in the London Telephone Book). It is a perfectly possible but non-existent English name, appropriate and memorable. Dickens tried many variants before he was finally satisfied.

With place-names it is the same. Many of our villages and towns have the sort of name they deserve. Lulworth, for instance, and Fernycombe (Devon), and Windrush. But one of the loveliest villages in Gloucestershire is called Poulton, which no one can describe as romantic or expressive ; and quite the least alluring possession of one of the greatest seaside resorts of the world is its name : Blackpool.

EXERCISE 28. From a Postal Directory, Post Office

Guide, A.A. Book or gazetteer of the British Isles find other place-names which you consider to be (a) suitable, (b) unsuitable.

(You may ask what an exercise like that is doing in a book which professes to be a guide to the making of prose. Well, it should encourage a sense of the *fitness* of words, and that is very much a part of the making of prose.)

Thomas Hardy in his Wessex novels affords us evidence of the contrast between real and invented place-names. Here are some of the names he uses for familiar places in or near his "Wessex": Christminster—Oxford; Castle Royal—Windsor; Havenpool—Poole; Aldbrickham—Reading; Kennetbridge—Newbury; Stoke Brehills—Basingstoke; Sandbourne—Bournemouth; Budmouth Regis—Weymouth.

Which are the more picturesque—the real names or Thomas Hardy's?

A tedious journey on the top of a bus may be relieved by pondering on the street names that meet one's eye. Alma Terrace, for instance; Douro Road. . . . It is unfortunate that British victories and campaigns have, in general, such unprepossessing names, for they are popular with the namers of streets and there are good patriotic reasons for having them perpetuated in this way.

But when it comes to calling the lines of pre-fabs Dunkirk Road, El Alamein Avenue, Tobruk Lane, Caen Crescent, some of us find it difficult to restrain a shudder. Do the residents feel ennobled? One wonders. The truth, one suspects, is that one is still too near these things. There is an arid regimentation in these batteries of tin homes which it takes a lot of



flower-beds and lines of washing to mitigate. One does not want military appellations as well, however fortifying they may be.

EXERCISE 29. Suggest suitable and exhilarating names for the streets of a pre-fab settlement.

EXERCISE 30. Invent names for modern characters resembling: Mrs. Grundy; Falstaff; Cinderella; Don Quixote; Mrs. Malaprop; Sir Roger de Coverley; Mr. Pickwick; Bill Sikes; Sir Andrew Aguecheek.

EXERCISE 31. In the ancient game of Happy Families the following names occur: Mr. Bung the Brewer; Mr. Potts the Painter; Mr. Bun the Baker; Mr. Bones the Butcher.

Fill in the following blanks: Mr. — the Ventriloquist; Mr. — the Film Star; Miss — the Typist; Mr. — the Tax-Collector; Miss — the Soprano; Mr. — the Civil Servant; Mrs. — the Magistrate; Mr. — the Photographer; Mr. — the Chemist; Miss — the Chiropodist; Mr. — the M.P.; Miss — the Racing Motorist.

### 8. Background

Sometimes you will be required to summon up a picture not so much of people doing things (which we have dealt with already) as of the surroundings or environment, natural or artificial, in which people do or might do this or that. To beginners at least, it will come more easily to set down a picture of surroundings with which they are familiar; once you start inventing you run the risk of making some fundamental mistake—such as that of the dramatist who wrote in “Act I—

The Drawing-room" that the sun was seen setting through the French window, and in "Act V—The Drawing-room again" that the rising sun was pouring in through the same window.

Here is an example of how to do it:

#### A HOUSEMASTER'S STUDY

It was a square, comfortable room, of the type usually described as having a lived-in look. That is to say, there were too many pictures on the walls—mostly groups of young gentlemen with bare knees and severe expressions—too many books on the table, and too many loose papers lying about everywhere. Just below the picture-rail upon the wall opposite the fire-place hung an oar with a light blue blade, emblazoned with certain arms in scarlet and gold and inscribed with nine names. The first name on the list read: *Bow, C. Donkin; 10 st. 10.* C. Donkin weighed more than that now.

Upon the Globe-Wernicke bookshelves which lined most of the room to a height of six feet or so were displayed an incongruous variety of what are politely called *objets d'art*—mainly the gifts of ex-pupils now engaged in bearing the white man's burden in distant parts of the globe and resolute in sending home undesired mementoes of the fact. There was a pair of lacquered Japanese vases; there was a little brown Buddha; there was an elephant's tusk, and a bronze statuette of the Winged Victory. There were also numerous cups and mugs, memorials of a strenuous youth, and photographs of boys everywhere.

Ian Hay: *The Housemaster.*

And here is an example of one of the ways in which it should not be done:

Some distance further on came the old church with its square tower, opposite to which was the Vicarage, and beyond again the roadway ended abruptly in the stone archway giving entrance to Rockhampton Court, the

residence of Lord Edward, a low grey stone building, rather sombre of aspect, though harmonising well with the paved court in which it stood and contrasting with the other side, where French windows opened on to a terrace bounded by a lawn such as no Oxford College gardener would have despised and which extended to a low stone wall built as a protection from the precipitous fall to the river beneath and to the lake made by Lord Edward's father, for the water-plants brought back with him from many countries, and who to gain a ready access to the latter had had a zig-zag path cut in the face of the rock and a door made in the wall, but realising how both of these might prove dangerous to his then young son he would never have more than one key made and that he kept in his own possession.

*Extract from a novel.*

EXERCISE 32. Describe the room in which you now are.

Once again let us remind you that a description is not an inventory. Before launching out at random upon the various pieces of furniture and decoration which the room contains, try to form a general impression of it. Is it a pleasant room? Are the proportions good? Are the pictures on the walls of any use as ornaments—have they any part in a thought-out scheme of decoration? What are the prevailing colours—do they harmonise? What indications are there, if any, of the tastes and personalities of its chief occupants.

Perhaps you have spent so many hours here that you have come to take all the room's features for granted. They have ceased to make any impression on you. Imagine it, then, as it might appear to someone coming into it for the first time. What sort of impression would *he* form of it?



In reacting to an environment our minds are moved largely by associations. What will the room seem like to the newcomer: A station waiting-room? A baronial hall? A vet's consulting-room? A dungeon?

Employ all your senses. What does the room *feel* like? Has it a glossy stream-lined look about it, in the modern functional operating-theatre style of interior decoration? What does it smell like?

The descriptions of the Voysey dining-room, given below, will show you what can be done by a practised hand. The impression the room makes on each occasion is everything, for Granville-Barker is careful to point out how the room changes in mood or "atmosphere" according to circumstance.

For further models, look at some of Barrie's stage directions. More even than Granville-Barker, Barrie wrote for the reader and not simply for the producer. His descriptions are full, witty, and whimsical—the descriptions of a novelist.

The demand for reading versions of plays has naturally encouraged successful playwrights to cater for those admirers of their work who cannot or will not get to the theatre. Note that Shakespeare, who had nothing to gain by writing elaborate directions (for literary pirates got most of the profits from the printed versions), was as concise as anyone could be: *Winter's Tale*, Act III, Scene III: *Bohemia—A desert Country near the Sea. Enter Antigonus, with the Child; and a Mariner; and at the end of the scene: Exit, pursued by a bear.*

Barrie would certainly have described the bear.

## THE VOYSEY DINING-ROOM

*(Act II) Before they Join the Ladies*

The Voysey dining-room at Chislehurst, when children and grandchildren are visiting, is dining-table and very little else. And at the moment in the evening when five or six men are sprawling back in their chairs, and the air is clouded with smoke, it is a very typical specimen of the middle-class English domestic temple. It has the usual red-papered walls, the usual varnished woodwork which is known as grained oak; there is the usual hot, mahogany furniture; and, commanding point of the whole room, there is the usual black-marble sarcophagus of a fireplace. Above this hangs one of the two or three oil-paintings, which are all that break the red pattern of the walls, the portrait, painted in 1880, of an undistinguished-looking gentleman aged sixty; he is shown sitting in a more graceful attitude than it could ever have been comfortable for him to assume. Mr. Voysey's father it is, and the brass plate at the bottom of the frame tells us that the portrait was a presentation one. On the mantelpiece stands, of course, a clock; at either end a china vase filled with paper spills. . . .

*(Act III) The Funeral Luncheon*

The dining-room looks very different in the white light of a July noon. Moreover, on this particular day it isn't even its normal self. There is a peculiar luncheon spread on the table and on it are decanters of port and sherry; sandwiches, biscuits and an uncut cake; two little piles of plates and one little pile of napkins. There are no table decorations, and indeed the whole room has been made as bare and as tidy as possible. Such preparations denote one of the recognised English festivities, and the appearance of Phoebe, the maid, who has just completed them, the set solemnity of her face and the added touches of black to her dress and cap, suggest that this is probably a funeral. . . .

*(Act V) Christmas Eve*

Naturally it is the dining-room which bears the brunt of

what an English household knows as Christmas decorations. They consist chiefly of the branches of holly, stuck cock-eyed behind the top edges of the pictures. The one picture conspicuously not decorated is that which hangs over the fireplace, a portrait of Mr. Voysey, with its new gilt frame and its brassplate marking it also as a presentation. Otherwise the only difference between the dining-room's appearance at half-past nine on Christmas Eve and on any other evening in the year is that little piles of queer-shaped envelopes seem to be lying about and quite a lot of tissue paper and string to be seen peeping from odd corners.

We give now two examples of the way in which the *scene*, the momentary background of one's life, can be described, brilliantly. The first is by a boy of eighteen (not more, if as much).

#### A CLASS-ROOM

The room is a large class-room with all the usual things a class-room contains: desks, a blackboard, ink on the dull green walls and dusty electric light cords. A black stove stands in one corner; the New Forest as it could never hope to be brightens one wall, and an outpost of Britain is drawing-pinned to another. A curious smell looms round the room, like a ghost of some forgotten master; but I remember that the same smell was here, four years ago, when an entirely different master ruled in these lands, and it was, in fact, probably here years before that. For it could not escape; there are no windows. The only light comes from a pane of glass in the roof, with two small intentional openings, which can be closed at will, and numerous small unintentional openings which not all the will-power in the world could close. I can imagine this poor little smell going round the room, trying first the intentional openings, and then the unintentional ones, and being pushed back by the elements every time.

A clock high up on one wall hiccups defiantly at half-minute intervals; it is fed by a pipe-line carrying electricity, which drags its way round half the room before finding a



way out. The pegs on the wall look sullen and bad tempered; at least they would if you could see them, but they are covered by straw hats. The wall itself is worth noticing: take another look at it. Not content with being plain Wall, it has grown ventilators, picture rails, and indescribable bulges here and there. The linoleum on the floor is through.

So am I.

R. P. C. Thompson.\*

The next explains itself:

A POET'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF AMERICA

I woke to hear we were in harbour, and tumbled out on deck at six of a fine summer morning to view a new world. New York Harbour is loveliest at night perhaps. On the Staten Island ferry-boat you slip out from the darkness right under the immense sky-scrappers. As they recede they form into a mass together, heaping up one behind another, fire-lined and majestic, sentinel over the black, gold-streaked waters. Their cliff-like boldness is the greater, because to either side sweep in the East River and the Hudson River, leaving this piled promontory between. To the right hangs the great stretch of the Brooklyn Suspension Bridge, its slight curve very purely outlined with light; over it luminous trams, like shuttles of fire, are thrown across and across, continually weaving the stuff of human existence. From further off all these lights dwindle to a radiant semicircle that gazes out over the expanse with a quiet, mysterious expectancy. Far away seaward you may see the low golden glare of Coney Island.

But there was beauty in the view that morning, also, half an hour after sunrise. New York, always the cleanest and least smoky of cities, lay asleep in a queer, pearly, hourless light. A thin mist softened the further outlines. The water was opalescent under a silver sky, cool and dim, very

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\* Reginald Perronet Campbell Thompson, Dragon School, Oxford, and Cheltenham College; R.A.F. He was killed when his bomber crashed in England after a raid over Germany.

slightly ruffled by the sweet wind that followed us in from the sea. A few streamers of smoke flew above the city, oblique and parallel, pennants of our civilisation. The space of water is great, and so the vast buildings do not tower above one as they do from the street. Scale is lost, and they might be any size. The impression is, rather, of long, low buildings stretching down to the water's edge on every side, and innumerable low black wharves and jetties and piers. And at one point, the lower end of the island on which the city proper stands, rose that higher clump of the great buildings, the Singer, the Woolworth, and the rest. Their strength, almost severity, of line and the lightness of their colour gave a kind of classical feeling, classical, and yet not of Europe. It had the air, this block of masonry, of edifices built to satisfy some faith, for more than immediate ends. Only, the faith was unfamiliar. But if these buildings embodied its nature, it is cold and hard and light, like the steel that is their heart. The first sight of these strange fanes has queer resemblances to the first sight of that lonely and secret group by Pisa's walls. It came upon me, at that moment, that they could not have been dreamed and made without some nobility. Perhaps the hour lent them sanctity. For I have often noticed since that in the early morning, and again for a little about sunset, the skyscrapers are no longer merely the means and convenience for men to pursue their purposes, but acquire that characteristic of the great buildings of the world, an existence and meaning of their own.

Our boat moved up the harbour and along the Hudson River with a superb and courteous stateliness. Round her snorted and scuttled and puffed the multitudinous strange denizens of the harbour. Tugs, steamers, queer-shaped ferry-boats, long rafts carrying great lines of trucks from railway to railway, dredgers, motor-boats, even a sailing-boat or two; for the day's work was beginning. Among them, with that majesty that only a liner entering a harbour has, she went, progressed, had her moving—English contains no word for such a motion—“*incessu patuit dea*.” A goddess entering fairyland, I thought; for the huddled



beauty of these buildings and the still, silver expanse of the water seemed unreal. Then I looked down at the water immediately beneath me, and knew that New York was a real city. All kinds of refuse went floating by: bits of wood, straw from barges, bottles, boxes, paper, occasionally a dead cat or dog, hideously bladder-like, its four paws stiff and indignant towards heaven.

Rupert Brooke.

You will notice that this is not one description of the famous sky-line, but two. The first, which is the first paragraph, is a Whistlerian nocturne, and the second, which is the second paragraph, is an etching by Henry Rushbury. In the first Brooke concentrates on colour—black, gold-streaked waters, luminous trams, fire-lined masses, Coney Island's golden glare; in the second, on form—streamers of smoke, oblique and parallel, pennants of our civilisation (fine phrase!), long, low buildings stretching down to the water's edge, that higher "clump"—cold and hard and light, like the steel that is in their heart.

And in the third paragraph the second sketch comes to life, as stills are sometimes made to do on the cinema screen. The writer, up to this point a detached observer, is now given for the first time his precise place in the life of that morning and that city. He is a passenger on a liner entering harbour.

But he should not have called the *Aquitania*, or whatever it was, "our boat."

We conclude this section with the following extract because we feel that it is an extremely apt description of a Channel steamer—another action picture—and for a reason which will emerge when we get to the next chapter.



Sometimes the ship pitched and sometimes she rolled and sometimes she stood quite still and shivered all over, poised above an abyss of dark water; then she would go swooping down like a scenic railway train into a windless hollow and up again with a rush into the gale; sometimes she would burrow her path, with convulsive nosings and scramblings like a terrier in a rabbit hole; and sometimes she would drop dead like a lift. It was this last movement that caused the most havoc among the passengers.

Evelyn Waugh: *Vile Bodies*.

## CHAPTER II

### SIMILES AND METAPHORS

We have just been asking you to admire a description of a Channel crossing.

What is Evelyn Waugh trying to do here? He is trying to tell us that the steamer is having a rough time. He might simply have said that the ship was behaving as Channel steamers do when the sea is at its worst. But he does not, because some of us may never have crossed the Channel and others, fortunate in the weather, may have been spared the experience of a Channel steamer at her friskiest. Also, memories are short. Much of art and literature is the reminding us of things.

Evelyn Waugh must describe exactly what the ship was doing to cause havoc among the passengers. So he says "she swooped down like a scenic railway train" and "stopped dead like a lift." "Like a scenic railway train" and "like a lift" are similes. And he says "sometimes she would burrow her path, with convulsive nosings and scramblings like a terrier in a rabbit hole." There you have another simile, "like a terrier in a rabbit hole," and in addition the picturesque phrases "burrow her path," "with convulsive nosings and scramblings." These are metaphors.

#### **Similes**

The similes that we all employ in daily conversation or more deliberate expression vary from the simple,

colourless and conventional to the complex, original and forcible.

In the most elementary form, the writer or speaker takes the line of least resistance:

Wearing a fur coat over jodhpurs, she looked like nothing on earth.

They wept like anything to see  
Such quantities of sand.

Such phrases cannot be said to summon up a definite picture.

Very frequent, too, are the conventional similes. When you call a friend an ass, you do not mean that he has four legs, long ears and a tail; you are alluding to the age-old theory that the ass or donkey is naturally dull-witted. (The goose and the owl suffer from a similar tradition.) When you say that somebody looked "like a dying duck in a thunder-storm" it is quite possible that you do so without ever having seen a duck on any sort of death-bed.

Many of the commonest similes are as old as the hills (that is one of them), and we use them without worrying about their exact implication; but some provide interesting little sidelights on ideas and manners and customs now forgotten. Consider:

As hungry as a hunter.  
As plain as a pikestaff.  
As dead as a doornail.

As thin as a rake.  
As bold as brass.  
As cool as a cucumber.

(Notice the alliteration in some of these; it reminds one of something worn smooth by constant usage. But in "as fit as a fiddle" one suspects that alliteration is all.)



"Selling like hot cakes" suggests a forgotten chapter of history; "Drunk as a lord" is a social comment.\*

Though in ordinary conversation we are usually content to rely on the good old proverbial similes handed down to us by our forefathers, our writers have been by no means lacking in the inventiveness required to strike out new ones; the poets, in particular, have often coined similes so apt and novel that they get right home with all the force of unexpected things : e.g.

And thou art long, and lank, and brown,  
As is the ribbed sea-sand.

That is one of Wordsworth's few contributions to *The Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge was grateful for the gift and acknowledged it when the poem was published; he was himself capable of brilliantly illuminating comparisons, as any reader of *Kubla Khan* can see; but he was lazy by nature, and probably thought that Wordsworth's simile was as good as anything he could achieve.

There is also an original simile in Stevenson's *Island Nights' Entertainments* which has struck the fancy of others besides Mr. Polly:

"It never palled upon him that in the dusky stabbing of 'The Island of Voices' something poured over the stabber's hands '*like warm tea*.' Queer incommunicable joy it is, the joy of the vivid phrase that turns the statement of the horriest fact to beauty!"

H. G. Wells: *History of Mr. Polly*.

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\* "Before the great temperance movement set in, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, those who could afford to drink thought it quite *comme il faut* to drink two, three, or even more bottles of port wine for dinner. . . . The temperate habits of the last quarter of the nineteenth century renders this phrase now almost unintelligible."—Brewer: *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

(In point of fact, this phrase does not come in the story *The Island of Voices* but in the one called *The Beach of Falesa*: "The blood came over my hands, I remember, hot as tea . . .") Ask yourself which is the better—the original phrase or the "remembered" version.

### *A Collection of Similes*

Falstaff to his page:

I do here walk before thee like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one.

Shakespeare: *Henry IV, Part 2*.

" 'I'm pretty tough, that's vun consolation,' as the werry old turkey remarked ven the farmer said he was afeered he should be obliged to kill him for the London market."

Dickens: *Pickwick Papers*.

(The speech of Sam Weller and his father is full of other instances of what may be called the circumstantial simile.)

He wrapped himself in quotations, as a beggar would enfold himself in the purple of Emperors.

Kipling: *The Finest Story in the World*.

The day was as crisp as a good biscuit.

J. B. Priestley: *English Journey*.

She was the type of woman whom small, diffident men seem to marry instinctively, as unable to help themselves as cockleshell boats sucked into a maelstrom.

P. G. Wodehouse: *Piccadilly Jim*.

"Boys! let the flashes of your wit be as the summer lightning—lambent yet innocuous."

(Attributed to a past Headmaster of Rugby School.)

Her mind was like a small round pebble, without a flaw and without a scintillation.

Lytton Strachey: *Queen Victoria*.

The country, passing at once through an agricultural and a financial crisis, was in distress, and like all invalids,

it kept turning over, in the hope of feeling better on the other side.

André Maurois: *Disraeli*.

New similes (largely from America):

Old-fashioned as a blush.

Busy as a tick on a turtle.

Carefree as a roulette wheel.

Interesting as a conversation one can't quite overhear.

She had no more polish than a hiker's boots.

She kissed him with the warmth of one sticking a stamp on a letter.

Lots of people are like fish: they open their mouths, but they never say anything.

His imagination resembled an ostrich. It enabled him to run, though not to soar.

From Irish speech:

He was as wide and as wild as a hill.

As throng as three in a bed.

EXERCISE 33. (a) Make a list of twenty popular or conventional similes not mentioned anywhere in the section.

(b) Suggest modern alternatives for the bracketed words in the following similes :

bald as (a coot)

black as (ink)

brittle as (glass)

busy as (a bee)

clear as (daylight)

dry as (a bone)

fat as (a pig)

helpless as (a babe)

light as (a feather)

old as (the hills)

neat as (a new pin)

poor as (a church mouse)

safe as (the Bank of England)

sleep like (a top)

sound as (a bell)

stare like (a stuck pig)

straight as (an arrow)

warm as (a toast)

EXERCISE 34. Complete the following sentences as



aptly as you can (Example: My horse had as much idea of taking the fence as . . . a fish of climbing the Nelson Column).

The rain trickled off the sandwichman's bowler like . . .

As soon as his front wheel descended on the tintack there was a sound like . . .

The sergeant-major had a habit of puffing out his chest till he looked like . . .

At the first touch of the dentist's drill, Lord Amplegirth gave a yell like . . .

When it emerged from the oven, Lesson 1 in cake-making looked like . . .

The policeman put up a hand as big as a . . .

It was one of those cars with enormous exhaust pipes protruding from its bonnet like . . .

Throughout the night the rumbling and chattering of the cistern sounded like . . .

The nurse shook the thermometer as if it were . . .

### Metaphors

Here are a few sentences adapted from a newspaper account of a railway accident that occurred on the Continent some years ago:

When the express train overtook it, the slow train was moving, after a signal check, at no more than six miles an hour. . . . The great express locomotive ploughed its way through the slow train for nearly all its length, not merely telescoping the wooden coaches, but reducing them literally to fragments, sweeping their fragile superstructure before it like snow before a snow-plough, hurling roofs, partitions and panels to right and left, twisting their metal chassis into corkscrew shapes, bursting them asunder and scattering their heavy wheels like cotton-reels along the line. . . . When the breakdown train at length dragged the first wreckage away, the front of the express engine presented a strange appearance. Buffer-beam, frame-plate, smoke-box door and funnel were planed and levelled into

the likeness of a gigantic ploughshare. The boiler was plastered with debris. . . .

You will notice that the writer has used some similes: "like snow before a snowplough," "like cotton-reels," "into the likeness of a gigantic ploughshare." He has also used a number of expressions which *imply* comparisons, without definitely stating that the object or action is like something else. The locomotive "ploughed" its way through the slow train, "telescoping" the coaches. It is not necessary for the writer to say "went through the train like a plough" and "forced the coaches to slide into one another as the sections of a telescope do when the instrument is closed up." He takes it for granted that his readers will know how a plough cleaves its way through all obstructions in its path, and how one collapses a telescope, and so he calls up the two actions by the use of a single word for each. In reading his account we mentally substitute "express locomotive" for "ploughshare" and "slow train" for "soil." He puts down two metaphors and we do the rest.

Each of us has his own stock of pet metaphors, but there is a vast store belonging not to one person or another but to English people in general. Many of these are so common that we have ceased to think of them as metaphors at all. If you say that there was a great hue and cry over the news that Brown had been transferred from Chelsea to Wolverhampton Wanderers it will probably be without much thought in your mind of Anglo-Saxon methods of criminal detection. If you do not see the point of that, look up *hue and cry* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. When a friend hears you describe a birthday present from your aunt

as a white elephant, he will hardly be such a fool as to take the remark literally. But he may rightly suspect you of not knowing why you call it a white elephant and not a blue hippopotamus.

There are other terms which, though they cannot be taken literally, have lost their metaphorical significance. *To get the wind up*, for instance. Everyone knows what it means: to be oppressed by physical sensations of fear. No one knows how or when it came to be adopted as a metaphor. There have been suggestions that it was first used by airmen—something to do with the wind-stream from the propeller. But no one has satisfactorily explained what the wind was up to.

Consider also: *to show the white feather*; *curry favour*; *go the whole hog*; *kick the bucket*; *go west*; *go off the deep end*; *peter out*; *a grass widow* (someone whose husband is always playing golf?); *a game leg*.\*

How many of these would have been intelligible to (a) Shakespeare, (b) Sir Walter Scott, (c) Queen Victoria?

They must have been metaphors of a kind, originally. Now they are merely popular expressions or idioms, and we have hardly a clue to suggest how they have come to mean what they do. *Kicking the bucket* is probably connected with the upturned bucket that is kicked away when you are suspended by a rope, a rope noosed round your neck. Probably. But now it is just a slang term for dying, not necessarily with one's boots on.

These expressions are now therefore not really meta-

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\* There have recently been many letters to the *Sunday Times* on the origin of the expressions *knuckling under* and *knuckling down*. Most of the writers connect them with the game of marbles, but beyond that it seems to be all conjecture.



phors at all. They do not help us, as *plough* and *telescope* do in the account of the railway accident, to form a clear picture of a cowardly action, obsequious regard and so on.

EXERCISE 35. Explain the literal and metaphorical meaning of the following:

to hold a brief for. to talk shop. a blot on the landscape.  
to bring down the house. too many irons in the fire. to  
get it across. to stick to one's last. to run the gauntlet.  
a stitch in time. to break fresh ground. to burn one's  
boats. to throw up the sponge. the seamy side of life.  
to know the ropes. to throw the baby out with the bath  
water. when one's ship comes in. a flash in the pan.  
a pig in a poke. to give a wide berth to. lock, stock and  
barrel. to be on one's uppers. hook, line and sinker.  
poker-face. second string. bottle-neck. rubber-neck.  
eaves-dropping. wire-pulling. nit-wit. top-level.  
mare's nest. sour grapes. brain-wave. pot-boiler.  
cannibalisation.

EXERCISE 36. What metaphors do you know connected with the following objects or activities? Try to think of others besides those given in Ex. 35.

the moon. milk. straw. red herrings. playing cards.  
ducks. ship-building. the weather. cooking. the law.  
birds. eating and drinking. cricket.

If you want to see how much we rely on metaphorical phrases in our language, literary as well as colloquial, read Logan Pearsall Smith's *Words and Idioms*. He gives a very extensive analysis of the sources of these phrases. Cricket alone contributes ten. But of these one—"to score heavily"—he rightly queries, for one can (if suitably endowed) score heavily in other games as well. Another—"to stop the rot"—is certainly

used with great frequency in accounts of cricket matches; but it is not essentially a cricket term at all. If one wants to stop the rot *literally*, one sends for a plumber, painter, architect or builder, according to one's temperament or wealth; but no one would send for a cricketer.

It only shows how easy it is to be entirely unconscious of the source and true meaning of one's metaphors.

EXERCISE 37. Supply metaphorical equivalents to the words in italics:

1. I heard him *going* about the bedroom in bare feet.
2. Trans-Atlantic planes: those *speedy vehicles* of the air.
3. He was the *most important member* of the team.
4. In the quarrel between Jones and Brown, the fence which separated their two gardens was the *subject of disagreement*.
5. It is no good *refusing to take notice of* unpleasant facts.
6. There were seven cats in the room. It could be said that the room was *excessively full* of cats.
7. When I pressed Button B a *large quantity* of coppers shot out at me.
8. When I sang carols outside the police station, a *large quantity* of coppers shot out at me.
9. The yacht *sailed closely round* the headland.
10. The spiv became aware that he was being *deliberately watched* by the detective.
11. Slowly and noiselessly the train *came into* the station.
12. The actor gave a performance *designed to please the less cultured members of the audience*.
13. He had only to open his mouth to *make a disturbing impression* on any ear-drums within range.
14. Father, mother, the four infants, the parrot in its cage and the cat in its shopping basket, all *got out* of the carriage at the next stop.
15. The churchwarden *got down* under the pew and *anxiously looked about him* for the sixpence.

*Mixed Metaphors*

The broad issue on which the election will be fought is whether the country will give a fresh lease of life to the Government that saved the nation from disaster and is now engaged in unprecedented effort to preserve peace in Europe, or to hand over the reins of power to the crew who headed the Ship of State straight for the rocks and want to repeat the experiment. . . .\*

Local Paper: Leading Article.

The mixed metaphor is one of the two literary crimes the British public loves to bring home to the guilty party. (The other is the split infinitive.) The term is misleading. You are entitled to use any mixture of metaphors you like, in an argument or passage of description, so long as you keep each metaphor distinct from its neighbours. Indeed, a rapid succession of entirely unrelated metaphors is the sign of a peculiarly fertile mind, the mind of a poet.

Stop and consider! life is but a day;  
 A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way  
 From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's sleep  
 While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep  
 Of Montmorenci. Why so sad a moan?  
 Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown;  
 The reading of an ever-changing tale;  
 The light uplifting of a maiden's veil;  
 A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;  
 A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,  
 Riding the springy branches of an elm.

Keats: *Sleep and Poetry*.

Properly speaking, the mixed metaphor is the incongruously sustained metaphor. Consider again that

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\* Notice besides the mixed metaphors the fault in the construction of this passage: "whether the country will give a fresh lease of life . . . or to hand over the reins of power . . ."



local paper's leading article. Apart from the fact that they are clichés—metaphors or familiar phrases with all the freshness worn off them by constant usage—there is no harm in introducing *broad issues* and *fresh leases of life* into the same sentence: the metaphors are distinct and the reader is not required to link the one with the other so as to form any concrete picture in his mind. But later on we are asked to visualise reins being handed over to a crew who have just carried out an experimental shipwreck. We cannot do it. The combination of the equestrian, the nautical, and the scientific is too much for us. We can of course see what the writer means, but his metaphors distract rather than assist; and when metaphors do that they are better away.

We have seen that many of our popular expressions are really metaphors with a literal meaning which the ordinary man ignores when he uses them: e.g. *white elephant*. But these literal meanings cannot always be ignored. One can say: "The man did not reply for fear of putting his foot in it" and no one is likely to be fool enough to ask—"In what?" But there is the old joke about the man who "never opened his mouth without putting his foot in it." Why does that sound funny? Because the literal implication of putting one's foot in it springs to life when the expression is coupled with another physical image: *opening one's mouth*.

The remedy is to be awake to the metaphorical potentialities of every expression one uses. In the war of 1914-18 a German prison-commander once announced to his British captives with spiteful glee that another 100,000 troops of the Fatherland had gone

west that morning. There was an instantaneous roar of applause and the poor man was once more left bewildered and enraged by British inconsequence.

### *The Word "Literally"*

The word *literally* must be used with care. It should imply that the expression it qualifies must be taken not metaphorically but as a straightforward statement of fact. "The car skidded and the pedestrian was literally swept off his feet by the bumper." Here *literally* is quite correct. The bumper of the car acted like a broom and did in fact knock the pedestrian's legs from under him. So, at least, our informant would have us believe. And if he says: "I went to a Promenade Concert the other evening. The violin soloist was so wonderful we were all swept off our feet with enthusiasm" we are sufficiently accustomed to metaphorical usage not to picture the entire Albert Hall audience on all fours. But if, to emphasise his impression, he should say "were all *literally* swept off our feet," he is abusing the English language and putting an undue strain upon our sense of humour.

*Literally* has the effect of converting what might be taken as a metaphor into a definite statement of fact. It often is used, *but never should be used*, for emphasis.

### *A Collection of Metaphors, Apt and Otherwise, for Consideration and Comment*

Not the imaginary wolf of the Red Riding Hood story, but the grim real wolf "Hunger" is part of our work down here in East London.

Charity Appeal.

I saw arched stone bridges over the river where tracks

turned off from the road and we passed stone farm-houses with pear trees candelabraed against their south walls.

Ernest Hemingway: *A Farewell to Arms*.

The British Government should take a firm grasp of a ticklishly fluid situation. . . .

It is believed that the Prime Minister is reaching out for an ad hoc de facto modus vivendi.

The British Press on relations with Italy, Sept., 1943.

Simon de Montfort laid the first piece of track on which to run the Parliamentary train.

Examination Candidate.

The French, cracking through the mountains like a house on fire. . . .

B.B.C. Broadcast.

Unless the Cabinet give the Minister of Agriculture authority to resist the excavation of highly productive land, his efforts to encourage a 20 per cent. increase in agricultural output will be undermined in more senses than one.

Letter to the Press on Opencast Coal.

Going up Broadway Hill and turning left you drop down on Chipping Campden.

W. G. McMinnies: *Touring the Cotswolds*.

Mainly dull; some bright intervals.

School Report, quoted in a last leader of *The Times*.

Soon after Shaw and the Wellses came Hardy seemed to curl up. He had travelled to town that day and was evidently fatigued.

From Arnold Bennett's *Diary*.

Women, it has been said, are of two kinds: those who boil their children to make soup for their husbands, and those who reverse the process.

*Time & Tide* Book Review by Ambrose Pryde.

I am a child of the House of Commons.

Winston Churchill: Speech to Congress, Dec. 1941.

On so slow a wicket the Marlburian failing of not getting



out to the ball paid disastrous dividends and Winchester snapped up their catches.

School Magazine.

Awake, O north wind ; and come, thou south ; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.

*The Song of Solomon.*

At present, as far as our internal economy is concerned, steel is the greatest bottleneck we have to face.

Minister of Fuel and Power.

## CHAPTER III

### THE RAW MATERIAL OF PROSE

#### 1. Increase your Vocabulary

You probably realise that you could write better essays, be a more interesting correspondent, make better speeches when called upon after a dinner, or in a debating society, and when conversing with your fellows be altogether more alert and entertaining, if your vocabulary were not so restricted. Most of us have felt at one time or another, with regard to our powers of expression, much as a peculiarly intelligent ape might if left alone in an organ loft. It is all there—all the tremendous power and glory of the English language—but somehow the sounds that ensue when we start experimenting with it are not quite what we hoped they might be.

"The normal vocabulary of the average man," says C. K. Ogden in his introductory manual of Basic English, "hovers between the alleged 300 words of the Somersetshire farmer, the 4,000 of President Wilson's State Papers, the 7,000 of the Japanese Diplomat, the 12,000 of the Eskimo fisherman or average undergraduate, the 30,000 of Sir Vade Mecum, C.V.O., at Geneva, and the 250,000 of a Craigie, an Okakura, or a Salzedo."

This is misleading. We do not know about the verbal resources of Okakura or Salzedo, but Craigie (Dr., later Sir William, Craigie) was only one of the editors of the great *Oxford Dictionary* (see page 81) which was begun in 1884 and completed in 1928.

He was responsible for the sections N, Q-R, Si-Sq, UV, Worm-Wyzen. In the whole Dictionary there are 240,165 main words, 177,970 being current, 52,464 obsolete and 9,731 alien. Craigie may possibly have known the meaning of all these words, but it is doubtful whether a tenth of them found a place in his normal vocabulary. Readers of *The Times*, Ogden tells us, require a vocabulary of 50,000 words. One may understand the meaning of this essential fifth of the total number of words in the English language and yet be incapable of using more than a fiftieth of that number in ordinary conversation and correspondence.

The best way to improve your vocabulary is always to carry a dictionary about with you so that you can immediately look up any word you are not sure about. But the smallest dictionary imposes some physical if not financial strain upon the pocket, and even a notebook in which words can be jotted down to be looked up later is more than most of us feel inclined to burden ourselves with continuously. Nevertheless, if you are really keen to become proficient in your own language, you will do one or other of these things.

You must in any case possess or have easy access to a good dictionary.

**EXERCISE 38.** Explain what the following words mean and compose a short sentence to illustrate the meaning of each of them:

deprecate. cordiality. philippic. castigate. exacerbate.  
irreconcilable. hypothetical. counterpart. reiterate.  
comity. computation. potential. fortuitous. bilateral.  
impeccable. arbitrary. altruistic. jeopardise. directive.  
specious. lethargic. grandiloquent. sanguine. verbose.



negation.    reactionary.    obese.    forthright.    acumen.  
atom.    aesthetic.    tantamount.    embryonic.    obloquy.  
scintillate.

EXERCISE 39. Examine recent leading articles in *The Times* (or any other national or local newspaper that may be handy). Look out in a dictionary all the obscure words you come across, and sometime later, *without further reference to the dictionary*, attempt a definition of each one.

Habit plays a large part in our vocabulary. We rely too much on certain words, neglecting others entirely. Give these other words a chance. It may be that other people, even some quite famous authors, are also creatures of habit. They also have their pet words. Study them, and use their words as a change from your own. When you are reading anything, encourage yourself to say: I know the meaning of that word; it is a very useful word; *why have I never used it?*

Try reading a dictionary through as you would a novel or copy of the *Autocar*—from beginning to end. You will probably be astonished and chastened by the number of words you will find that you are certain you have never even seen before. Many of them will be technical words or oddities, but you will acquire some useful words as well, and almost certainly revise your notions of the meanings of many others.

## 2. Definitions

Definition is the art of describing what we mean by the words we use. When you are having an argument with anyone, be sure that you are applying the same meaning as your opponent to the terms forming the basis of the argument. If, for instance, someone

says to you: "Gentility is only another name for snobbery," before you start contradicting him it is essential that you should find out what precisely he means by those two words *gentility* and *snobbery*.

*Communism* is a term which is now responsible for a greater expense of breath and temper than probably any other in the English language. (It used to be the Gold Standard; and not so very long ago it was *liberty* and *equality* and *fraternity*). But if you ask a dozen people what *communism* means you will get at least half-a-dozen and possibly thirteen different answers, many of them entirely satisfactory. For communism is like that. So before launching out upon an enquiry into the rights and wrongs of the system, see that your interpretation of the term is accepted by the company present.

Definition is not an easy art, whether applied to abstract terms or common objects. Consider these three definitions of the word *net*.

1. A lot of holes tied together with bits of string.
2. An open-work fabric made of twine or string cord, forming meshes of a suitable size, used for the capture of fish, birds or other living things.
3. Texture woven with large interstices or meshes, used commonly as a snare for animals; anything made with interstitial vacuities.

1. is a well-known popular version; 2. is the first definition of the word given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: it is there followed by others comprehensive enough to cover various objects—e.g. hair-net, tennis net—depending on the mesh principle; 3. is Dr. Samuel Johnson in his characteristic style. Notice how similar it is to the generally derided No. 1. "any-

thing made with interstitial vacuities" is merely "holes tied together" translated into Latinistic terminology. It is neither fair nor helpful to get out of it like that.

EXERCISE 40. Give a definition (approximately 20 words) of the following:

avenue. heat-wave. telescope. eclipse. submarine.  
envelope. by-pass. sky-scraper. antler. parachute.

EXERCISE 41. Criticise the following definitions:

Tripod: a stand made up of three legs to put a camera upon.

Crater: the inside of a volcano.

Decanter: something to put bottles of wine into.

Wind-mill: a mechanical structure for grinding wheat, moved by the wind.

Apple-dumpling: a baked apple with pastry all round it.

Biretta: what a clergyman wears on his head.

Railway Terminus: when a train gets to a station and can't go any further.

Joy-stick: the thing you move if you want an aeroplane to go up or down.

Rose: the end of a watering-can the water comes out of.

Organ-stop: a metal tube like a gigantic tin-whistle.

Nib: the part of a pen that is not the holder.

Parrot: a bird that can talk.

Gravity: what Newton discovered and undertakers have to preserve.

Contralto: a low sort of music that some ladies sing.

Momentum: something that increases rapidly when you fall from a great height.

Swastika: a cross with right angles on each end.

Rations: small quantities of food, supplied weekly by the Government.

EXERCISE 42. Compose satisfactory definitions of the terms given above.

A man who was told by his doctor that he was



suffering from chronic alcoholism asked whether he could give his complaint a milder title. The doctor replied at once: "Syncope." On his return home the patient looked the word up in the dictionary and found: "*Syncope*: an irregular progress from bar to bar."

### *The Definition of Abstract Terms*

We have already explained that you should never venture to use an abstract term unless you are quite certain that you yourself and those you are addressing agree upon the meaning of that term. You must have a clear definition of it in your mind, to produce if necessary.

This is one of the primary rules of argument and exposition. It is often broken, and out of the transgression comes anything from a check in the gentle interplay of two discordant minds to cracked skulls and the scream of a police whistle.

*Communism*, we have mentioned as a term likely, almost always, to need definition. Here are some others:

**EXERCISE 43.** Define the following terms:

pacifism. vegetarianism. truth. socialism. spiritualism. conscription. atheism. the middle classes. nationality. life. liberty. happiness. wealth.

When people disagree about the precise meaning of an abstract term they usually end by consulting a dictionary. This is a good thing to do, but it does not always settle the dispute. *Pacifism*, for instance, is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as *the doctrine that the abolition of war is both desirable and possible*. If that were all that is implied by pacifism, there would

be little controversy about it. The controversy in fact begins where the definition leaves off: as to the means by which war shall be rendered impossible. In this instance the dictionary defines only the general term and by refraining—wisely enough—from doing more than this it fails us as a final arbiter.

Some terms are so profound in their significance that no brief definition can do entire justice to them. *Art*, for instance; *beauty . . . truth*. What is Truth? We are reminded of Pontius Pilate's contemptuous retort, and the opening sentence of Bacon's first Essay: What is Truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.

Bacon does not define Truth, presumably because he is writing for scholars and friends who would not be likely to interpret the term in any way but his. But if we want to know about Truth, to apprehend the real nature of Truth, we can learn as much from his essay as from any dictionary definition.

Here is the definition given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

Quality, state, of being true or accurate or honest or sincere or loyal or accurately shaped or adjusted.

—which takes us to *true*, to be found in the same Dictionary as:

1. In accordance with fact or reality, not false or erroneous.

2. In accordance with reason or correct principles or received standard, rightly so called, genuine, not spurious or hybrid or counterfeit or merely apparent, having all the attributes implied in the name.

And here are two suggestions offered by Bacon in

the course of his essay, which ought to guide us to a stronger realisation of what Truth is:

“To pass from theological and philosophical truth, to the truth of civil business . . .”

“The poet (Lucretius) saith excellently well: It is a pleasure to stand upon the shore, and to see ships tossed upon the sea; a pleasure to stand in the window of a castle, and to see a battle and the adventures thereof below: but no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of Truth, (a hill not to be commanded, and where the air is always clear and serene,) and to see the errors, and wanderings, and mists, and tempests, in the vale below; so always that this prospect be with pity, and not with swelling or pride.”

In the place of definition, description by metaphor or simile is frequently effective. The late Lord Balfour was once observed gazing with curiosity and unfeigned dismay at the crowded floor of a hotel ball-room. A fox-trot was in progress. Someone asked him what he thought of this modern dancing. “Modern dancing?” he replied. “It’s like going for a country walk impeded by a member of the opposite sex.”

And so one gets from the definition to the metaphorical description, and from the metaphor to the epigram.

Consider the following: In each pair the first is *one* of the definitions of the term given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

*Happiness*: the state of pleasurable content of mind, which results from success or the attainment of what is considered good.

*Happiness* may be defined as the state of that person who, in order to enjoy his nature in the highest manifestation of conscious feeling, has no need of doing wrong. (Coleridge.)



*Conduct*: manner of conducting oneself or one's life; behaviour; usually with more or less reference to its moral quality (good or bad).

*Conduct* is three-fourths of life (Matthew Arnold's favourite aphorism).

*Vulgarity*: the quality of being vulgar, unrefined, or coarse. (vulgar: having a common and offensively mean character; coarsely commonplace; lacking in refinement or good taste; uncultured, ill-bred.)

*Vulgarity* is an inadequate conception of the art of living (Bishop Creighton).

*Remembrance*: that quality of mind which is involved in recalling a thing or fact; recollection.

*Remembrance* is the feeling which steals over one when listening to one's friends' original stories (Lord Rosebery).

*Teaching*: the imparting of instruction or knowledge: the occupation or function of a teacher.

*Teaching* consists of throwing sham pearls before real swine (Anon.).

### Epigrams

What is an epigram? A short saying (or poem) of a witty kind and generally with a satirical intention. They are sometimes called aphorisms and (more rarely) apophthegms. Anon.'s description of teaching is an epigram. So is Bernard Shaw's "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Epigrams, one need hardly add, are seldom quite fair. But they must contain a modicum of truth or they cease to have any point. And a pointless epigram is a contradiction in terms.

We are not going to ask you to sit down and write some epigrams. Beerbohm-Tree, the famous Edwardian actor-manager, was in the habit of going up to insignificant members of his company during lulls in

rehearsals and asking them to "say something amusing." It would be as difficult for any of us to compose on the spur of the moment a really witty comment on some aspect of life.

But the efforts of others are sometimes worth remembering. So:

EXERCISE 44. Set down the six best epigrams you have ever heard.

Remember that an epigram, just as much as a poem, is "memorable speech." The thought it expresses grips our minds by its originality, of course, and its wisdom, but the strength beneath that grip, its muscular power upon us, lies as much in the neatness and brevity with which the thought is expressed. The exact words used have, consequently, a great significance. To improve upon them should be difficult; to compress the thought further, impossible.\*

Consider for instance the famous epigram about genius. *Genius is the infinite capacity for taking pains.* This is popularly ascribed to Carlyle. But what Carlyle actually said was: "Genius (which means transcendent capacity of taking trouble, first of all). . . ." It may have been an original remark in the sense that his own experience or study of men had convinced him that genius was like that. But others † have observed it too:

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\* The reverse process is, alas, sometimes apparent. A preacher recently observed: Divine intervention presupposes, and indeed is contingent upon, human endeavour. In other words, God helps those who help themselves.

† Cf. Thomas A. Edison's famous remark: "Genius is one per cent. inspiration and ninety-nine per cent. perspiration."

La genie n'est autre chose qu'une grande aptitude à la patience. (Buffon.)

Patience is a necessary ingredient of genius. (Disraeli.)

Genius is a capacity for taking trouble. (Leslie Stephen.)

### 3. Dictionaries

(Recollect that as we are dealing only with English, so this section refers only to English Dictionaries.)

It is probably true that dictionaries are chiefly used when people are in trouble over the *spelling* of a word ; what is technically called its *orthography* (which means "correct writing").

But the best dictionary is not an indisputable authority. There are many instances in which the speller is still at liberty to please what Sam Weller called his taste and fancy. Consider: judgment/judgement and similar words; connection/connexion and similar words; many verbs ending in *-ise* may be spelt with *-ize*; develop/develope.

The only other use that most people make of a dictionary is to find out the *meaning* of an unfamiliar word, or sometimes the unfamiliar meaning of a common word. The science of meanings is called *semantics* (which means "significances").

But the best dictionaries go further, and offer a great deal of information to the properly curious student; e.g.:

(a) *Phonetics*—how to pronounce the word, both as regards the sound of it or its syllables, and of the stress or stresses usually given to words of two or more syllables.

(b) *Etymology*—whence the word is derived; often showing parallel derivatives in other languages.



(c) *History* of the use of the word ; shown by dated quotations, grouped when necessary under the various meanings which the word may have acquired.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (as it is now called) stands unrivalled. Its original title was *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, and it is that—the historical method—which makes it unique. “It is a Dictionary,” the Oxford University Press says, “not of our English, but of all English—the English of Chaucer, of the Bible, and of Shakespeare is unfolded in it with the same wealth of illustration as is devoted to the most modern authors.” It was based on the collections of the Philological Society, aided by an army of voluntary readers and special researchers; this material was edited, first and foremost, by Sir James Murray, and by Henry Bradley, Sir William Craigie, and Dr. Onions. Publication began in 1884 and was completed in 1928. In those forty-four years the English language had of course grown; therefore a Supplement was published in 1933.

The Oxford Dictionary is in twelve volumes (the Supplement a thirteenth), containing 16,400 pages. It records over 400,000 words, of which roughly 240,000 are “main words” and the other 160,000 are subordinate words or combinations. Of the main words about 180,000 are in current use, 50,000 obsolete, and 10,000 alien. There are about 500,000 definitions and 1,827,306 illustrative quotations. The treatment of the oldest words covers a period of twelve centuries.

Every serious student of English, whether he wants to know the spelling, the pronunciation, the meanings, or the derivation of any word, or to study its history and how English writers have used it, should avail

himself of this work. (Incidentally, as Lord Curzon pointed out, it answers innumerable questions of a historical and literary and philological character, such as come up for discussion week by week in correspondence in the press.) The thirteen volumes are too expensive and bulky for most householders, so it is up to you to find out the nearest library or reading- or reference-room that possesses a copy, and learn your way about the Dictionary.

So much for the parent work. There is also *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*; like the "big Murray," it is "on Historical Principles," but with fewer quotations. This is in two volumes, comprising 2,500 pages. Next comes *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* "of Current English" in one volume, and another, somewhat smaller, *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, also "of Current English."\*

#### 4. Roget's Thesaurus

On April 29, 1852, Dr. Peter Mark Roget, sometime secretary of the Royal Society, completed the first edition of his *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases, classified and arranged so as to facilitate the expression of ideas and assist in literary composition*. This Thesaurus (which means a treasure-house) is still a standard work of reference, and a very present help to writers of every degree of competence.

"Conceiving that such a compilation might help to supply my own deficiencies," writes Dr. Roget in his Preface, "I had, in the year 1805, completed a classed catalogue of words on a small scale, but on the same

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\* A dictionary of the authority, size and scope of one of these latter you should certainly possess and use.



principle, and nearly in the same form, as the Thesaurus now published. I had often, during that long interval, found this little collection, scanty and imperfect as it was, of much use to me in literary composition, and often contemplated its extension and improvement." When he retired from the Secretaryship of the Royal Society he set himself to this task. It took him three or four years and (as he says) an amount of labour very much greater than he had anticipated.

It was worth it. Thousands of writers must have thanked a kindly providence for Roget, when in the very throes of literary composition they have found themselves lacking imagination . . .

"Imagination"? Is that quite the word we want? Let us use Roget. Look up "imagination" in the index (which, by the way, is nearly half the length of the whole book). We are referred to paragraph 515. There, under IMAGINATION, we find grouped:

(*Substantives*) fancy, conception, ideality, idealism, inspiration, verve, dreaming, somnambulism, frenzy, ecstasy, excogitation, flightiness of fancy, reverie, trance.

(*Verbs*) To imagine, fancy, conceive, idealise, realise; fancy, or picture to oneself; create, originate, devise, invent, coin, fabricate.

(*Phrases*) To take into one's head; to figure to oneself; to strain or crack one's invention; to strike out something new; to give play to the fancy; to give the reins to the imagination; to set one's wits to work.

(*Adjectives*) Imagining, imagined, etc.; ideal, unreal, unsubstantial, imaginary, *in nubibus*, fabulous, fictitious, *ben trovato*, fanciful, air-drawn, air-built, original, fantastic, whimsical, highflown.

Imaginative, inventive, creative, fertile, romantic, flighty, extravagant, fanatic, romanesque, enthusiastic, Utopian, Quixotic.



Warm, heated, excited, sanguine, ardent, fiery, boiling, wild, bold, daring; playful, fertile, etc., imagination or fancy.

Obviously there is a great deal more there than we need at the moment; but we can find in it suggestions, if not of the word we seek, at least of other kindred ideas, which we then proceed to turn up in Roget's other pages, until we find the right one. And every time we do this, we learn more about the system on which this *Compendium* (see 596: summary, abstract, epitome, digest, synopsis, scrap-book, commonplace-book, anthology) of *Style* (see 569: diction, phraseology, turn of expression, idiom, manner, strain, composition, authorship) is compiled.

Wherever the subjects admit of it—which is in the large majority of cases—the idea and its opposite are set beside each other in parallel columns, e.g.:

LENGTH  
LIGHT  
GOODNESS  
WEALTH

SHORTNESS  
DARKNESS  
BADNESS  
POVERTY

each with its own store of synonyms and phrases; and in practice you will find that the negative side is often as helpful as the positive.

But as Roget points out in his Preface, "in many cases two ideas which are completely opposed to each other admit of an intermediate or neutral idea. . . . Thus:

IDENTITY  
BEGINNING  
PAST

DIFFERENCE  
MIDDLE  
PRESENT

CONTRARIETY  
END  
FUTURE

In other cases, the intermediate word is properly the standard with which each of the extremes is compared; as in the case of:

## INSUFFICIENCY

## SUFFICIENCY

## REDUNDANCE

It often happens that the same word has several correlative terms, according to the different relations in which it is considered. Thus: *Old* has for opposite both *New* and *Young* according as it is applied to *things* or to *living beings*. *Attack* and *Defence* are correlative terms, as are also *Attack* and *Resistance*. *Resistance*, again, has for its other correlative *Submission*. *Truth in the abstract* is opposed to *Error*; but the opposite of *Truth communicated* is *Falsehood*. . . . *Disuse* and *Misuse* may either of them be considered as the correlative of *Use*. *Teaching*, with reference to what is taught, is opposed to *Misteaching*; but with reference to the act itself, its proper reciprocal is *Learning*."

One can understand why the compilation required of Roget "an amount of labour very much greater than he had anticipated."

Here is a typical entry from the *Thesaurus*:

**HARDNESS**—*N.* hardness, etc.; rigidity, renitence, inflexibility, temper, callosity, durity, induration, petrification; lapid-ification, -escence; vitri-ossi-fication; crystallization.

stone, pebble, flint, marble, rock, fossil, crag, crystal, quartz, granite, adamant; bone, cartilage; heart of oak, block, board, deal; iron, steel; cast-, wrought-iron; nail, brick, concrete; cement.

*V.* render hard, etc.; harden, stiffen, indurate, petrify, temper, ossify, vitrify.

*Adj.* hard, rigid, stubborn, stiff, firm, starch-ed;

**SOFTNESS**.—*N.* softness, pliability, etc.; flexibility; pliancy, -ability; sequacity, malleability; duct-, tract-ility; extend-, extens-ibility; plasticity; inelasticity, flaccidity, laxity.

clay, wax, butter, dough, pudding; cushion, pillow, feather-bed, down, padding, wadding.

mollification, softening, etc.

*V.* render soft, etc.; soften, mollify, mellow, relax, temper; mash, knead, squash.

bend, yield, relent, relax, give.

*Adj.* soft, tender, supple;

stark, unbending, unlimber, unyielding; inflexible, tense; indurate, -d; gritty, proof.

adamantine, -ean; concrete, stony, granitic, vitreous; horny, corneous; bony; oss-eous, -ific; cartilaginous; hard as a -stone, etc.; stiff as -buckram, -a poker.

pli-ant, -able; flex-ible, -ile; lithe, -some; lissom, limber, plastic; ductile; tract-ile -able; malleable, extensile, sequacious, inelastic.

yielding, etc.; flabby, limp, flimsy, flaccid, flocculent, downy; spongy, oedematous, medullary, doughy, argillaceous, mellow.

soft as -butter, -down, -silk; yielding as wax; tender as a chicken.

You will have to use a little common sense about selecting your words from such a store. The hyphens, of course, which are used to save space, mean that you can use either "lapidification" or "lapidescence" either "lithe" or "lithesome," and either "soft as butter" or "soft as down." But you had best use a dictionary for any word with which you are not familiar (and it is often illuminating to do so for a word you know quite well). If you are perfectly acquainted with the exact meanings of *sequacity* and *oedematous* and *medullary* and *argillaceous*, well and good; you will know where you can use them and where they would be absurd. But if the beginner, writing about drinks, wishes to say that lemonade is a soft one, he had better not choose *flocculent* as equivalent to *soft*.

Remember also that Roget made his lists of words in 1852, and although there are revised editions available, no dictionary or thesaurus of a *living* language can ever be quite up to date. Fashions change; some words and phrases get laid on the shelf, and others come in. If you look out Roget's "phrases" under DECEPTION you find:



To throw dust in the eyes; to play a trick upon; to cog the dice; to throw a tub to the whale; to make one believe the moon is made of green cheese

but you do not find "to lead a person up the garden path."

When you have come into possession of a Roget—or when at least you know the nearest library where a copy is available—it is a good plan to make a Thesaurus of your own; at any rate a collection of words and phrases applicable to any subject about which you are likely to want to write. It may be a weekly essay, a report of a match or a lecture or a concert, a letter of thanks for a birthday present, a "bread and butter" letter to a host or hostess—for all such compositions your instruments are words and phrases, and it is useful to have ready at hand an outfit from which you can make your selection.

Some gifted people can remember any striking word or phrase that they come upon in the course of their reading or conversation, and recall it when required. Such mental notes are better than no note at all; but for most of us storing things in our minds is very much like putting things away in the attic of a house—it is much easier to put them away there than to find them when we want them.

It is better, therefore, to make notes; the mere act of doing so helps the memory, and it is also easier than to classify the material under appropriate heads. One great merit in Roget is the scientific clarity with which he disposes his material; read his Introduction and study his method.

To make your own Thesaurus may be a counsel of perfection. Neither of the writers of this book has

ever made one, each being content to refer to Roget whenever he has a ticklish piece of writing to do; but that is no reason why we should not recommend you to improve on our methods.

EXERCISE 45. Here are a dozen of Roget's headings, positive and negative. Make your own collection of Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Phrases, etc., appropriate to each pair, and set them down in Roget's manner. Then look up the headings in the *Thesaurus* and compare your results with Roget's.

BENEVOLENCE—MALEVOLENCE

IMPROVEMENT—DETERIORATION

INTELLIGENCE—IMBECILITY

SKILL—UNSKILFULNESS

WILLINGNESS—UNWILLINGNESS

POSSIBILITY—IMPOSSIBILITY

CHEERFULNESS—DE-  
JECTION

INTENTION—CHANCE

KNOWLEDGE—IGNOR-  
ANCE

SPEED—SLOWNESS

MEMORY—OBLIVION

LENGTH—SHORTNESS

On the *Thesaurus* principle compile words and phrases which should be useful in writing a description of

A GOOD —

A BAD —

Actor. Singer. Dancer. Car-driver. Tennis-player. Wicket-keeper. Football or Hockey player (denote position in field). Skater. Referee. Touch-judge. Public. Speaker (1: Debater; 2: Parliamentary Candidate; 3. Distinguished Visitor on Speech-Day or opening the Flower-Show).

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GIST OF THE MATTER

Getting the gist of the matter is the sole object of a great amount of the reading we do in the course of a day. Putting the gist of the matter on paper is known in schools as "précis-writing," and is usually looked upon as a classroom penance. Dull work it may be, especially for those to whom a pen in the hand suggests creativeness and originality; but it is for all of us a very useful and necessary practice.

In life there is frequently précis-writing of one kind or another to be done. At every moment of the day someone is called upon to write a report of a speech, a game, a performance, the minutes of a meeting, or a summary of an important business conversation; and one of these days that someone may be you. You may become the secretary of a committee, the adjutant of a regiment, the head of a business department, or the editor of a journal or magazine; and you will have to report, to note down, to write out the gist of the matter with which you are dealing. Précis jobs await you everywhere, and many of them will not be so easy as the exercises you are just coming to. For example, to abbreviate, to condense, to boil down somebody else's written or printed account of some event is as nothing compared with the delicate business of reporting the gist of a speech which when taken down verbatim was anything but lucid, or of writing the minutes of a meeting at which various points of view were expressed at length on each of several items of the Agenda.



Before beginning on the following exercises, one or two hints may be useful.

When you have in front of you written matter to condense, read the original through *carefully*. After the first reading you may find you have not a very clear idea of what it is about. If that is so, read it through again. It is surprising what just one more reading can do. When you feel that you have the main framework of the original clearly in your mind, put the original aside, and without looking at it at all make a brief summary of its contents. Fifty words should be sufficient at this stage.

If you look at the original while you are doing this, you will not be giving yourself a fair chance. As likely as not, your version will be a mere snatching from their context of certain sentences of the original, to the probable exclusion of other sentences perhaps equally vital. Pruning of this kind can only lead to fragmentary results.

When you are satisfied that your fifty-word summary contains the gist of the matter, expand it to the length required by the introduction of important details—vital facts, precise statistics, accurate dates, etc.—obtained from the original. *See that all such details are correctly reproduced*: you have now the original before you from which to check them, so there is no excuse for inaccuracy.

Set your version out in a readable form. Short sentences. Plenty of paragraphs. Each main idea (or, if narrative, incident) should have a paragraph to itself.

Provide your summary with a title. A good title is a further condensation of the matter in hand, a sum-

mary in five words instead of fifty; and to find it a correspondingly intense effort may be required.

Save words by expressing everything as concisely as you can. Avoid pompous phraseology: instead of saying:

It is plainly apparent that Test Matches played out without a time limit are meeting with no small objection in cricketing circles.

write:

Cricketers obviously do not like timeless Tests.

The matter to be condensed may sometimes consist of a series of letters between two or more parties. Do not condense each letter separately (unless you have been expressly told to do so). What is wanted is a record, in abbreviated form, of the course which the correspondence takes. Your fifty-word summary should contain the essential points upon which the whole correspondence turns.

There is little room in a short summary for exact transcription of direct speech. When the remarks of eye-witnesses are quoted (for the sake of picturesqueness), one need not give, as newspapers so often do, the witness's full name, age, address and occupation. For instance:

William Stumps, 49, stonemason's labourer, of 4 Pickwick Row, said: "The fire at the Rectory lit up the whole of the village street. My house is a quarter of a mile away, but I could see to read the smallest print in my newspaper."

If you think a remark like that worth recording, it is quite sufficient to say it was made by "a neighbour" or "an onlooker."

### Passages for Abbreviation

Give the substance of each:

- (a) in about one third of the length of the original,  
(b) in about 300 words (where this differs from (a)).

#### EXERCISE 46.

#### HOW THEY TOOK THE GOLD-TRAIN

[Amyas Leigh and his crew, having left their ship, are wandering in the woods of what is now Colombia, in the extreme north of South America. They are short of food and out of gunpowder, and have made themselves bows and arrows. They are now lying in ambush, having received information from friendly Indians of the approach of a Spanish "gold-train" on its way to the river.]

So, having blocked up the road above by felling a large tree across it, they sit there among the flowers chewing coca, in default of food and drink. At last, up from beneath there was a sharp crack and a loud cry.

"Men!" said Amyas in a low voice, "I trust you all not to shoot till I do. Then give them one arrow, out swords, and at them! Pass the word along."

Up they came, slowly, and all hearts beat loud at their coming. First, about twenty soldiers, only one half of whom were on foot; the other half being borne, incredible as it may seem, each in a chair on the back of a single Indian, while those who marched had consigned their heaviest armour and their arquebuses into the hands of attendant slaves, who were pricked on at will by the pikes of the soldier behind them.

Last of this troop came some inferior officer, also in his chair, who, as he went slowly up the hill with his face turned toward the gang which followed, drew every other second the cigar from his lips, to inspire them with those pious ejaculations to the various objects of his worship, which earned for



the pious Spaniards of the sixteenth century the uncharitable imputation of being at once the most fetish-ridden idolaters, and the most abominable swearers of all Europeans.

"The blasphemous dog!" said Yeo, fumbling at his bowstring as if he longed to send an arrow through him. But Amyas had hardly laid his finger on the impatient veteran's arm, when another procession followed, which made them forget all else.

A line of Indians, negroes, and Zambos, naked, emaciated, scarred with whips and fetters, and chained together by their left wrists, toiled upwards, panting and perspiring under the burden of a basket held up by a strap which passed across their foreheads. There were not only old men and youths among them, but women—slender young girls, mothers with children running at their knee; and, at the sight, a low murmur of indignation rose from the ambushed Englishmen, worthy of the free and righteous hearts of those days.

But the first forty, so Amyas counted, bore on their backs a burden which made all, perhaps, but him and Yeo, forget even the wretches who bore it. Each basket contained a square package of carefully-corded hide; the look whereof friend Amyas knew full well.

"What's in they, captain?"

"Gold!" And at the magic word all eyes were strained greedily forward, and such a rustle followed that Amyas, in the very face of detection, had to whisper:

"Be men, be men, or you will spoil all yet!"

The last twenty or so of the Indians bore larger baskets, but more lightly freighted, seemingly with manioc and maize-bread, and other food for the party; and after them came, with their bearers and attendants, just twenty soldiers more, followed by the officer in charge, who smiled away in his chair and twirled huge mustachios, thinking of nothing less than of the English arrows which were itching to be away and through his ribs. The ambush was complete; the only question, how and when to begin?

Amyas had a shrinking, which all will understand, from

drawing bow in cold blood on men so utterly unsuspecting and defenceless, even though in the very act of devilish cruelty—for devilish cruelty it was, as three or four drivers, armed with whips, lingered up and down the staggering file of Indians, and avenged every moment's lagging, even every stumble, by a blow of the cruel manati-hide, which cracked like a pistol-shot against the naked limbs of the silent and uncomplaining victim.

Suddenly the *casus belli*, as usually happens, arose of its own accord. The last but one of the chained line was an old gray-headed man followed by a slender, graceful girl of some eighteen years old. Just as they passed, the foremost of the file had rounded the corner above: there was a bustle, and a voice shouted, "Halt, senors! There is a tree across the path!" The line of trembling Indians, told to halt above and driven on by blows below, surged up and down on the ruinous steps of the Indian road, until the poor old man fell grovelling on his face.

The officer leaped down and hurried upward to see what had happened. Of course, he came across the old man.

"Grandfather of Beelzebub! Is this the place to lie worshipping your friends?" and he pricked the prostrate wretch with the point of his sword. The old man tried to rise: but the weight on his head was too much for him; he fell again, and lay motionless. The driver applied the manati-hide across his loins, once, twice, with fearful force; but even that specific was useless.

"Used up, Senor Capitan," he said with a shrug; "he has been failing these three months."

"What does the intendant mean by sending me out with worn-out cattle like these? Forward there!" shouted he. "Clear away the tree, senors, and I'll soon clear the chain. Hold it up, Pedrillo!"

The driver held up the chain, which was fastened to the old man's wrist. The officer stepped back, and flourished round his head a Toledo blade; and Amyas thought that he was going to display the strength of his arm and the temper of his blade in severing the chain at one stroke.

The blade gleamed in the air, once, twice, and fell—not



on the chain, but on the wrist which it fettered. There was a shriek—a crimson flash—and the chain and its prisoner were parted indeed.

One moment more, and Amyas's arrow would have been through the throat of the murderer; but vengeance was not to come from him. Quick and fierce as a tiger-cat, the girl sprang upon the ruffian and with the intense strength of passion clasped him in her arms, and leaped with him from the narrow ledge into the abyss below.

There was a rush, a shout; all faces were bent over the precipice. The girl hung by her chained wrist; the officer was gone. There was a moment's awful silence, and then Amyas heard his body crashing through the tree-tops far below.

"Haul her up! Hew her in pieces! Burn the witch!" and the driver, seizing the chain, pulled at it with all his might, while all, springing from their chairs, stooped over the brink.

Now was the time for Amyas! Heaven had delivered them into his hands. Swift and sure, at ten yards off, his arrow rushed through the body of the driver, and then, with a roar as of the leaping lion, he sprang like an avenging angel into the midst of the astonished ruffians.

His first thought was for the girl. In a moment, by sheer strength he had jerked her safely up into the road. The men of Devon had followed their captain's lead; a storm of arrows left five Spaniards dead, and a dozen more wounded. Down leaped Salvation Yeo with his white hair streaming behind him, with twenty good swords more, and the work of death began. Five desperate minutes, and not a living Spaniard stood upon those steps; and certainly no living one lay in the green abyss below.

"Now then! Loose the Indians!"

They found the armourer's tools on one of the dead bodies, and it was done.

"We are your friends," said Amyas. "All we ask is that you shall help us to carry this gold down to the Magdalena, and then you are free."

Some few of the younger grovelled at his knees and kissed



his feet; but the most part kept a stolid indifference, and when freed from their fetters sat quietly down where they stood, staring into vacancy. The iron had entered too deeply into their soul.

But the young girl, who was last of all in the line, as soon as she was loosed, sprang to her father's body, speaking no word, lifted it in her thin arms, laid it across her knees, kissed the fallen lips, stroked the furrowed cheeks, murmured inarticulate sounds like the cooing of a dove, of which none knew the meaning but she, and he who heard her not, for his soul had long since fled. Suddenly the truth flashed on her; silent as ever, she drew one long heaving breath, and rose erect, the body in her arms.

Another moment, and she had leaped into the abyss. They watched her dark and slender limbs, twined closely round the old man's corpse, turn over and over and over, till a crash among the leaves and a scream among the birds, told that she had reached the trees; and the green roof hid her from their view.

"Brave lass!" shouted a sailor.

Charles Kingsley: *Westward Ho!* chap. xxv.

#### EXERCISE 47.

##### KING LEAR

When this Lear, or Leyth after some writers, was fallen into impotent age, to know the mind of his three daughters, he first asked Gonorilla, the eldest, how well she loved him; the which calling her gods to record, said, she loved him more than her own soul. With this answer the father being well contented, demanded of Ragan, the second daughter, how well she loved him; to whom she answered, and affirming with great oaths, said that she could not with her tongue express the great love she bare to him, affirming furthermore that she loved him above all creatures. After these pleasant answers had of those two daughters, he called before him Cordeilla the youngest; the which, understanding the dissimulation of her two sisters, intending to prove her father, said, Most reverend father, where my two sisters have dissembled with thee, with their pleasant words

fruitless, I, knowing the great love and fatherly zeal that toward me ever before this time thou hast borne (for the which I may not speak to thee otherwise than as my conscience leadeth me), therefore I say to thee, father, I have loved thee ever as my father, and shall continually, while I live, love thee as my natural father. And if thou wilt further be inquisitive of the love that I to thee bear, I ascertain thee that as much as thou art worthy to be beloved, even so much I love thee, and no more.

The father with this answer being discontent married his two elder daughters, that one unto the Duke of Cornwall, and that other unto the Duke of Albania or Scotland, and divided with them two in marriage his land of Britain after his death, and the one half in hand during his natural life: and for the third, Cordeilla, reserved nothing. It so fortunately after, that Aganippus which the Chronicle of England named Agamp, and the king of France, heard of the beauty and womanhood of Cordeilla, and sent unto her father and asked her in marriage. To whom it was answered that the king would gladly give to him his daughter, but for dower he would not depart with: for he had all promised unto his other two daughters. Aganippus, thus by his messengers informed, remembered the virtues of the forenamed Cordeilla, and without promise of dower married the said Cordeilla.

Then it followeth in the story, after this Lear was fallen in age, these foresaid two dukes, thinking long or the lordship of Britain was fallen to their hands, arose against their father, as testifieth Gamfride, and bereft him the governance of the land, upon certain conditions to be continued for term of life; the which in process of time more and more were minished as well by Magleyr as by Hemyon, husbands of the forenamed Gonorilla and Ragan. But most displeased Lear the unkindness of his two daughters, considering their words to him before spoken and sworn, and now found and proved them all contrary.

For the which he being of necessity constrained, fled his land and sailed into Gallia for to be comforted of his daughter Cordeilla; whereof she having knowledge, of



natural kindness comforted him: and after showing all the manner to her husband, by his agreement received him and his to her lord's court, where he was cherished after her best manner. Long it were to show unto you the circumstance of the utterance of the unkindness of his two daughters and of the words of comfort given to him by Aganippus and Cordeilla, or of the counsaile and purveyance made by the said Aganippus restored again to his lordship, and, so possessed, lived as ruler and governor thereof by the space of three years after; in which season died Aganippus. And when this Lear had ruled this land by the term of forty years, as affirmeth diverse chronicles, he died and was buried at his town of Kaerlier or Leicester, leaving after him, for to inherit the land, his daughter Cordeilla.

Robert Fabyan: *Chronicles of England and France*.

#### EXERCISE 48.

##### GENERAL SMUTS AND THE STRIKERS

The reason for Smuts going to South Wales was that the Welsh coal miners were on the edge of revolt.

Men were needed to make good the losses in Flanders, and the coal mines were the last great reservoir for fighters and workers. Now, among the mines, anti-war agitators were working up a strike. Supporters of the Government asked that Smuts might come and help them. Mr Lloyd George thought it a wise plan, and before Smuts left he said to him: "Remember, my fellow-countrymen are great singers!" Smuts himself describes his adventure among the miners:

I arrived at Cardiff the next morning, where they gave me a great reception. I became a Doctor of the University. That afternoon I went to the coalfields, where I was due to arrive that night. I found that practically the whole way from Cardiff to the coalfields was lined by mobs on



strike. But they were interested to see this man from South Africa. I really think they expected me to be a black man, and they seemed very much astonished that I was not.

I got out everywhere and made little speeches. Finally I arrived at Tonypandy, which was the centre of this great strike. There I had my first meeting of the series which had been arranged for me to address. In front of me there was a vast crowd numbering thousands and thousands of angry miners, and when I got up I could feel the electricity in the air.

I started by saying: "Gentlemen, I come from far away, as you know. I do not belong to this country. I have come a very long way to do my bit in this war, and I am going to talk to you tonight about this trouble. But I have heard in my country that the Welsh are among the greatest singers in the world, and before I start, I want you first of all to sing me some of the songs of your people."

Someone in the huge mass struck up "Land of My Fathers." Every soul present sang in Welsh, and with the deepest fervour. When they had finished, they just stood, and I could see that the thing was over.

I said: "Well, gentlemen! It is not necessary for me to say much more tonight. You know what has happened on the Western Front. You know your comrades in their tens of thousands are risking their lives. You know that the Front is just as much here as anywhere else. The trenches are in Tonypandy, and I am sure you are actuated by the same spirit as your comrades in France. It is not necessary for me to add anything. You know it as well as I do, and I am sure you are going to defend the Land of your Fathers, of which you have sung here tonight, and that you will defend it to the uttermost—and that no trouble you may have with the Government about pay or anything else will ever stand in the way of your defence of the Land of your Fathers." That is all I said.

I do not think I spoke for more than a few minutes. I went on to the next meeting, and repeated the same thing there, and so right on through the coalfields. That night

I took the train back to London in time to attend the Cabinet the next afternoon.

When I arrived at the Cabinet they said to me: "What has happened? All the men are at work. How did you settle it?"

I said: "Well, it is news to me that the men are at work."

That great song helped us to win through at the very moment when a paralysing blow was being struck at us—when we were being told by our navy that they only had reserves of coal for a week, and if this strike went on for another week we should be paralysed and finished. It was then that "Land of My Fathers" saved us.

From Sarah Gertrude Millin's *Life of General Smuts*.

#### EXERCISE 49.

##### THE CRYSTAL PALACE: DESTRUCTION BY FIRE

##### *Vast Crowd of Spectators Glow seen at Brighton*

The greater part of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham and nearly all that was in it perished in flames last night.

Between 7 and 7.30 p.m. an outbreak of fire was seen in the main central part of the building; three hours later more than two-thirds of the great structure was a flaring mass of ruins on the ground, and the fire was burning relentlessly, against a fresh wind, through the remaining wing. Only the two high, round towers, one at either end, were spared. So far as could be known last night all of the few persons who were inside when the fire broke out were able to leave safely.

When the alarm was given the permanent firemen attached to the Palace did their utmost with the appliances at hand, but it was quickly evident that their efforts were hopeless, and by the time the first motor-pumps arrived from Penge the whole of the central transept was involved.

##### *Task of the Brigade*

A brigade call was at once circulated, and men and appliances arrived in succession from many parts of London



and the suburbs; but they could do practically nothing more than slightly delay the destruction. The conditions were all against them. The line of the Crystal Palace building runs north-north-west to south-south-east, with the main central transept at right angles. Last night the wind was blowing freshly from the north-west, with the result that the fire, starting in the front of the transept, was blown right through it to the back and also down through the south-east wing. Within half an hour of the outbreak all of these portions were ablaze like a vast bonfire, which, set on a great ridge which dominates South London from a height of over 300 ft., was visible for miles. Thousands of people immediately recognized the meaning of that great glare, and set out for the Palace by every means of transport, and everywhere could be heard genuine expressions of regret for the end of "the poor old palace."

On the wide, handsome Crystal Palace Parade, which runs along the front of the building, the motor pumps were stationed and the turn-table ladders set up, and a score of hoses played on the fury of flame, but the result seemed negligible. The Chief Officer, Major Morris, arrived and took charge of the operations. One of the first of his problems was that of water, for at that height the pressure available from the mains was insufficient, and the emergency reservoir and tanks which exist in the neighbourhood had to be brought into use.

### *A Twisted Skeleton*

The scene along the Parade was awe-inspiring. The flames roared up the entire height, perhaps 100 ft., to the top of the great round arch of the central transept, and along the whole length of this and the south-west wing. Masses of glass dropped continually, and section by section the huge skeleton of ironwork visibly bent and twisted and fell with heavy crashes and in immense showers of sparks; the steady glare spread far beyond the Parade, and shone on the faces of thousands of people ranked along the railway line below.

For some time there was fear that the flames would reach



the tower on the south flank, which stands almost on Anerley Hill, for it was reported that there was explosive material inside this structure, which is partly used by the Baird Television Company for experimental purposes. The possible fall of the tower also threatened to involve the destruction of a number of buildings on Anerley Hill, and the occupants of these were warned by the police of the danger. As it happened the fire burned so swiftly and intensively that the south-west wing was brought down to the ground before the flames could reach the tower.

At the north-east end the flames worked steadily against the wind and soon caught the low brick building in front of the Palace proper, part of which was used as a post office, and then spread to the remaining wing. On this wing and on the two towers the firemen, giving up the hopeless fight elsewhere, concentrated their efforts, but the flimsy material inside the wing structure burned farther and farther along, in spite of all they could do.

### *A Striking Spectacle*

From afar off the great red glow in the sky seemed like an exaggerated sunset, wreathed in huge billowing clouds. Thousands of people hurried to the scene from miles around by car, on foot, and by bicycle. As the press grew these last-named were to prove an embarrassment, and sometimes a danger, to their owners. Every road nearby was packed with cars, and some drivers got to the top of Crystal Palace Road before the police placed a control across the junction with West Hill and turned back all vehicles attempting to reach the Palace.

Pedestrians could not be so easily handled, although the police were rapidly augmented by special constables. People crowded on to the parade fronting the Palace until the road was so thronged that firemen stood by helplessly with hoses which they could not connect up. A police control car succeeded, by constant pleading and urging "This road must be kept clear," in getting the far end of the parade free enough at any rate for the firemen to work unhampered.

From every window near the Palace the inhabitants gazed out on to the blazing building, and from every fence and tree sightseers watched the leaping flames. It was an impressive spectacle. The main building was silhouetted sombrely against the background of red flames and white smoke. Now and again the fire seemed to subside, but only to break out with renewed intensity.

Large numbers of people from Epsom and the surrounding district went on the Downs to watch the fire. On Banstead Downs also there were large numbers of on-lookers. The glow in the sky could be clearly seen from Guildford, and even as far away as Devil's Dyke, near Brighton. In North London hundreds of people went to Parliament Hill, Hampstead, to see the fire, and the higher points of the Heath were densely packed.

### *Loss to Music*

Mr. F. W. Holloway, who has been organist at the Crystal Palace for 40 years, was in the middle of a rehearsal of the Crystal Palace Choral and Orchestral Society when he heard of the fire.

"At about 8 o'clock (he said) I was informed that there was a fire, but that there was no need to be nervous, because it would soon be out, and we could carry on with our rehearsal. In less than five minutes the same man who had told me of the fire came back and said that it would be wise if we cleared out immediately. By then the Palace was blazing, but we were able to leave quite quietly by a nearby entrance."

Mr. Holloway lost all his personal music which he kept at the Palace, and the magnificent organ, which is estimated to have been worth £4,000, was completely destroyed. In addition the Handel Festival music, which, in Mr. Holloway's words, was "worth thousands of pounds," was also lost.

### *Hotel Manager's Story*

The manager of an hotel opposite the Crystal Palace said:

"At about 8 o'clock we saw a small light at the Sydenham end of the Palace. Within a few minutes there was a wild jangling of bells as fire engines came from all parts of South London; but it was amazing to see how quickly the flames spread. Within 20 minutes the centre part of the building fell in a great cloud of spark and flame. It was like a hellish pillar of sparks that went up into the sky.

"At the moment (9 o'clock) so many thousands of people are here that they are blocking the roads, and the fire is lighting up the whole of the district. You can see to read a newspaper several hundred yards away. I have been warned that we may have to get out of the hotel if the fire spreads to the north tower. There will then be a risk, I am told, that the tower might fall. Meanwhile the heat is intense—so intense that you cannot comfortably stand on the hotel veranda. Every now and then there is a mighty roar and crackling noise as the flames spread."

#### FIRE NEWS IN BRIEF

Mounted police helped to clear the crowds from the danger zone.

Events at the Palace which had been booked for a year ahead will have to be postponed.

Mr. J. E. Wright Robinson, clerk to the Crystal Palace Trustees, stated last night that the Palace was fully insured.

People living in Anerley Hill, which faces the South tower, hastily collected valuables and hurried from their homes.

The B.B.C. in their news bulletin advised crowds not to go too near the fire because of the difficulties of the police.

Domestic water supplies in the Palace district were reduced to half pressure owing to the requirements of the Fire Brigade.

Valuable plant and instruments from the premises of the Baird Television Company by the south tower were saved by members of the staff and by the Salvage Corps.

The new hose lorry of the Fire Brigade, which can reel out one and a half miles of hose at a speed of 15 miles an



hour, was used for the first time after being demonstrated only yesterday afternoon.

Captain van Weyrother, a Royal Dutch air liner pilot, saw the glow of the fire when his machine was reaching Margate. He was bringing from Amsterdam seven English passengers just home from India.

Hundreds of birds from the aviary within the central arch were released from their cages before the collapse of the roof. They fluttered through the smoke to nearby trees, and most of them escaped.

From *The Times*, December 1st, 1936.

#### EXERCISE 50.

##### CLEOPATRA AND THE KIPPER

But to reckon up all the foolish sports they made, revelling in this sort: it were too fond a part of me, and therefore I will only tell you one among the rest. On a time he went to angle for fish, and when he could take none, he was as angry as could be, because Cleopatra stood by. Wherefore he secretly commanded the fishermen, that when he cast in his line, they should straight dive under the water, and put a fish on his hook which they had taken before; and so snatched up his angling rod, and brought up fish twice or thrice. Cleopatra found it straight, yet she seemed not to see it, but wondered at his excellent fishing; but when she was alone by herself among her own people, she told them how it was, and bade them the next morning to be on the water to see the fishing. A number of people came to the haven, and got into the fisher boats to see this fishing. Antonius then threw in his line and Cleopatra straight commanded one of her men to dive under the water before Antonius men, and to put some old salt fish upon his bait, like unto those that are brought out of the country of Pont. When he had hung the fish on his hook, Antonius, thinking he had taken a fish in deed, snatched up his line presently. Then they all fell a-laughing. Cleopatra laughing also, said unto him: leave us Ægyptians your angling rod: this is not thy profession: thou must hunt after conquering of realms and countries.

From Plutarch's *Lives*, translated by Sir Thomas North.

## EXERCISE 51.

## SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS

Fairy story, probably the most lovely example of pure fantasy that has yet been seen on the screen. The plot, which follows closely that of the original tale by Grimm, tells of a Wicked Queen who is jealous of the beauty of her step-daughter, Snow White. Eventually she plans to have her killed. The huntsman, however, who is charged with the deed, cannot bring himself to do it, and Snow White escapes, terrified, into the forest. She flies through the dim wood—which her fears people with clutching hands, glowing eyes and evil beasts of prey—to fall at length, sobbing, on the ground. And then the sun strikes through the trees and the little forest creatures come out to welcome her, shyly at first and then joyfully. They lead her to the miniature home of the Seven Dwarfs who work in a diamond mine and which, like the home of all bachelors, is in a terrible mess. Snow White, with the help of the animals, tidies it up before they return. With the coming of evening the little, bearded men—Grumpy, Sneezy, Happy, Bashful, Dopey, Doc and Sleepy—arrive home singing their marching song “Hi-ho, hi-ho, back from work we go.” After some hesitation they agree to allow Snow White to stay with them, although they are a little afraid of the possible vengeance of the Wicked Queen. Meanwhile the latter, told by her magic mirror of Snow White’s escape, disguises herself as an old woman selling apples and takes to the Dwarf’s cottage poisoned fruit. Snow White bites an apple and falls to the ground in the sleeping death to which the only antidote is love’s first kiss. The Dwarfs, warned by the animals, return just too late and chase the Queen through a thunderstorm until she is killed by falling over a precipice. Sadly the little men build a shrine for Snow White in the woods where they keep watch through the seasons. The fame of the shrine grows, until a Prince who loved Snow White and had been seeking for her ceaselessly hears of the sleeping maiden. He visits the shrine, recognises the Princess and kisses her with the first kiss of love, the



antidote to the poison. Snow White awakes, the Dwarfs' tears turn to joy and "they live happily ever after." It is difficult to find any flaws in this very lovely film; there is beauty here and tenderness, fantasy and humour and, above all, a perfect understanding of a young child's dreams. The animation is almost perfect, giving, except on very rare occasions, the illusion of life. Snow White herself and the Prince are perhaps a little doll-like, but the gay little Disney animals, the Wicked Queen and the Seven Dwarfs are real "living" creatures. To see the film is to see into Fairyland. There are certain incidents in the picture nevertheless—for example, the flight through the forest and the witch's incantations—which make the film unsuitable for young and nervous children. For older children and adults, however, it is impossible to imagine a film which can be more highly recommended.

"E.P.": *Monthly Film Bulletin*, British Film Institute.

N.B.—If you are asked to summarise a piece of criticism like this, you must not let your own opinions or feelings intervene. It is very easy for the ingenious summariser, if maliciously inclined, to distort the sense of the passage he is working on.

## EXERCISE 52.

### STAGE COACH ADVENTURE

A few years ago, when highway robberies were more frequent than at present, the passengers of a stage coach, on its way to town, began to talk about robbers. One gentleman expressing much anxiety lest he should lose ten guineas, was advised by a lady who sat next to him, to take it from his pocket and slip it into his boot, which he did immediately. It was not long before the coach was stopped by a highwayman, who riding up to the window on the lady's side, demanded her money; she declared that she had none, but if he would examine the gentleman's boot, he would there find ten guineas. The gentleman submitted patiently, but when the robber departed he loaded his



female travelling companion with abuse, declaring her to be in confederacy with the highwayman. She confessed that appearances were against her, but said if the company in the stage would sup with her the following evening in town, she would explain a conduct which appeared so mysterious. After some debate, they all accepted her invitation; and the next evening in calling on her, were ushered into a magnificent room, where a very elegant supper was prepared. When this was over, she produced a pocket book, and addressing herself to the gentleman who had been robbed, said, "In this book, sir, are bank notes to the amount of a thousand pounds. I thought it better for you to lose ten guineas than me this valuable property, which I had with me last night. As you have been the means of my saving it, I entreat your acceptance of this bank bill of one hundred pounds."

*The Percy Anecdotes.*

## CHAPTER V

### ESSAYS AND HOW THEY ARE WRITTEN

First of all, what is an essay?

Originally the word meant no more than an attempt, a sketch, a preliminary draft, a marshalling of one's ideas on one subject or another. The earliest essays were seldom intended for publication. They were like the commonplace books which scholars were in the habit of keeping, the difference between them being that in a commonplace book the scholar stored up other people's ideas about things, whereas in an essay he set down his own.

His ideas might be, and very often were, inspired by what he had read: the thread of his argument might link together a number of quotations which would add their own lustre to the man's "essay." But if the work were in truth an essay and not a mere picking out of literary plums, there would be something in the way those quotations were linked together, something, and more than just something, in the argument itself, which would make the reader value the whole thing as a work of art.

An essay is not primarily a matter of supplying information. Suppose the theme is just a homely one, such as School Certificate Examiners often offer: "A Wet Day by the Sea," "Walking Tours," or "The Future of the Horse." Remember that you are being asked to provide an essay and not an article for an encyclopaedia. It is not the essayist's job to say everything.

People do, however, expect to learn something from an essay. What is that "something"?

Perhaps the easiest way to answer this is to take a practical example. We will choose the subject "The Future of the Horse." If one came across that title at the head of an article one might start reading what lay beneath with the pardonable expectation that one would be told what the writer thinks about the horse and its future: whether in England at any rate the horse would be extinct within the lifetime of most of us, or whether other things may happen, more gratifying to those of us who like horses and possibly to horses themselves. But it is possible that the essayist would not be very helpful as a prophet. He might jump a century or two; any essayist is entitled to do that. He might write of the horse as a species already extinct, lingering on in a lesser and at the same time greater sphere of life, in inn signs and museum galleries and monumentally as a strange scab upon wide stretches of down. A white horse will then be as mysterious and romantic as a winged horse. . . .

But we are not writing this essay, we are merely demonstrating that such a theme might start the imaginative mind upon a path which by its very unfamiliarity might surprise and delight others besides the owner of that mind, who first explored it for the fun of the thing. We have already impressed upon you that a story-teller is not upon oath.\* Nor for that

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\* *Not upon oath*: we have now used this expression twice, and it is only fair to remind you that Dr. Johnson used it first: "The writer of an epitaph should not be considered as saying nothing but what is strictly true. Allowance must be made for some degree of exaggerated praise. In lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath." (Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*.)



matter is the writer of essays. He can say what he likes. There are rules, of course. But they are very simple.

The first rule—and here we are coming to the answer to our question—is that he should have something to say, that he should say it, and having said it that he should end.

The second and last is that he should entertain.

Entertain? Write something that will keep a reader of average intelligence interested and ready to read on to the end of the last paragraph. That is the obligation of every professional author, but it applies in a lesser degree to the purveyor of information, who must make every effort to be lucid, but beyond that need go no great distance to beguile.

Here, then, is the answer to our question, is that “something” which every essay should possess. Charm . . . the capacity to delight.

John Masefield, in one of his public lectures, has likened this captivating quality—this thing *charm*—to a game of cricket which a passer-by pauses for a moment to watch. He watches one ball being bowled . . . being received by the batsman . . . being returned by the fielder . . . to the bowler. . . . He has much to do—a train to catch, a man to see—but the next ball *must* be a wicket. And an hour later possibly the man is rewarded by the hat-trick or a six.

Your essay should in just the same way hold the attention of anyone who happens by chance to come upon it. Scatter the pages in his path, see him pick one up and having devoured that, see him (your pride mounting) search round eagerly for the next in proper sequence, and the one before, until he has the whole

series. Then see him (your pride now having disciplined itself into a becoming modesty) settle down to an orgy of intellectual indulgence, the silence of satisfaction broken only by low chuckles and little cooings of delight.

Read it aloud to whatever company can be prevailed upon to listen to it. Take a pitch in Hyde Park. Curiosity will bring you a handful of people. If they listen to you patiently, without comment or guffaw, it is probably a good essay. If one person stays until the end, taking in carefully what you are saying, it is probably a good essay. But it must be someone in full possession of his faculties.

An essay must charm.

Yes, you may say, that's all very well. It's also somewhat obvious. It's like telling a conjuror he is sure to be a success if he can turn any selected member of his audience into a white rabbit. He will probably agree, but he will also want to know if you have any suggestions to make upon the way the trick can be done.

How is one to write an essay that will prove entertaining to others?

Take a hint from the man engaged in making conversation. Without preaching or laying down the law or lecturing, he contrives to tell his companions something they do not know already, about places he has seen or adventures he has had. Whether the place is humdrum or romantic is immaterial, whether the adventure is fantastic or trivial matters not at all. What does matter is that you must say your say with spirit and show what you have made of that place or that adventure.

Your essay may not be very different in substance from a letter—not a business letter, but the best type of filial epistle which reaches your parents, we hope, at regular times, and is, you may be sure, eagerly read by them. Among amateurs this species of essay is certainly the most numerous. Numerous and various. And it is not fair to yourself to condone your possibly rather inarticulate efforts by saying you are a bad letter-writer. Everybody at times is a bad letter-writer. And everyone is capable at other times of writing something quite fascinating.

You may say that if you are having a dull time you write a poor letter and if you are having an exciting time you write a good one. Possibly. But it need not be like that. It is often a question of mood; and what we have called mood is sometimes given the more dignified term “inspiration,” or lack of it.

On this point Anthony Trollope has some wise things to say in his *Autobiography*, a book every prospective author should read and keep beside him.

According to the circumstances of the time—whether my other business might be then heavy or light, or whether the book which I was writing was or was not wanted with speed,—I have allotted myself so many pages a week. The average number has been about 40. It has been placed as low as 20, and has risen to 112. And as a page is an ambiguous term, my page has been made to contain 250 words; and as words, if not watched, will have a tendency to straggle, I have had every word counted as I went. . . .

There are those who would be ashamed to subject themselves to such a taskmaster, and who think that the man who works with his imagination should allow himself to wait till—inspiration moves him. When I have heard such doctrine preached I have hardly been able to repress my scorn. To me it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were



to wait for inspiration or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting.

. . . I was once told that the surest aid to the writing of a book was a piece of cobbler's wax on my chair. I certainly believe in the cobbler's wax much more than the inspiration.

Bear that in mind, and this too. Writing is not only the putting of pen to paper or the tapping of type-writer keys. It is as much the collecting of thoughts and impressions. If your time is limited, as it will be in an examination, do not be in too much of a hurry to get busy with your pen. Think. Reflect. Spend anything up to a quarter of an hour putting down all the ideas you can think of connected with the subject of the essay. If you are not working against time, carry the subject about in your head for a day or two and have a notebook and pencil ready so that you can put down ideas, sentences, whole paragraphs even, that may occur to you. It is more than probable that in the end you will not make use of many of these, but they will have served you well if only in giving you a fuller view of your subject. And one of them should open the door you want.

**EXERCISE 53.** Choose one of the subjects given below and put down briefly the ideas it suggests to your mind. Time limit: a quarter of an hour.

**SUBJECTS:** Ghosts. Uncles. Pools. Christmas. Islands. Sisters (or Brothers). Sundays. Mondays. Prams. Handcuffs. Snakes. Ladders. Steeplejacks. Inventions. Chew-ing-gum.

EXAMPLE: *Chewing-gum.*

Different flavours.

Why an American, more than a British pastime?

Manufacture and marketing of.

Effect on physiognomy.

Efficacy as a social asset . . . like tobacco?

Additional uses for . . . substitute for putty, etc.

Suspected ingredients of.

How first thought of (cf. Charles Lamb on Roast Pig).

EXERCISE 54. (a) Make out a list of all the subjects in Exercise 52 and put beside each the idea which you feel you could develop most entertainingly into an essay.

(b) Expand one of those ideas into an entertaining essay.

EXERCISE 55. Describe—for inclusion in a letter—an adventure, trivial, it may be, but amusing, that has befallen you in the course of the week.

The following essays are not to be taken as examples of what a good essay should be. Examine their structure and the ideas upon which the argument of each is based. And if you detect faults and immaturities, be charitable. It may encourage you to feel that you can improve upon them.

Essays by accomplished masters can be studied in the weekly reviews—*The New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *Time and Tide*, etc., in *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, *The Manchester Guardian*, and *The Times* (last leader), and in many other newspapers and periodicals.

## MY IDEAL HOUSE

My ideal house is probably very different from the kind of house you have probably ever lived in, but it always seems to me that all the houses I have ever lived in have lacked something, whether they are an ordinary house or a hotel or a tent.

Taking those three in that order, an ordinary house is much too ordinary for my liking. They are all the same, with a dining-room, lounge, kitchen and perhaps a study which generally means a room where the tennis net is kept in the winter, and golf clubs and fishing rods and half-made aeroplanes can be hustled away into if they are left about anywhere else. There may be another room for the junk that has not been looked at for years and years.

Junk rooms are very necessary in their way, particularly with large families as one grows out of toys and they have to be stored until the next one is old enough to use them. And of course she may be a girl and in that case will probably want different toys.

But what one wants is an empty room where one can do anything one likes, carpentry, painting, soldering, etc. If one is allowed to spend as much money as one likes on one's ideal house I should like to have this room made sound proof. Then one could play any records one wants to, whatever anyone else may think of hot music, two at a time if you like, I have known it done and the effect can be quite wizard.

Another thing I should like to have in my ideal house is a much larger bath-room. I should like a bath in which one could go for a good long swim. There is nothing like swimming for exercise and it would not take much longer to do a couple of lengths or even half a dozen than just to lie wallowing as one generally does when the water happens to be hot—on an average about once every six months in my experience. I should like a shower too in case I was in a hurry.

Another thing I should like is a flat roof for sun-bathing on. I think I might get quite fond of astronomy if I had a flat roof.



Some people I know seem to think that the ideal house is a hotel, anyway they always live in them. I don't see that the average hotel has any advantage over the private house, though it might be rather nice to have a lift if it always worked and I would like to have one of those rotating front doors in my ideal house, the kind that has actually a number of front doors radiating off the centre like the spokes of a wheel. You push one in front of you as you go in and another immediately closes behind you unless it has caught someone trying to get in immediately behind you. It is a very good thing to have in cold weather as it is impossible for anyone to go out without shutting the door.

The other kind of house I have mentioned is a tent. I do not get much kick out of camping so a tent seems to me very doubtful value. It has nothing ideal about it except that it can be taken down and put up somewhere else. But I do not see how any house worth calling a house could be taken down like that and put up somewhere else without causing a lot of wear and tear. And who wants to keep moving anyway.

Now have a look at Stevenson's "The Ideal House" in his *Later Essays*.

#### MEALS

When I told Jim I was going to write an essay on "Meals" he said in his opinion the main thing to say about meals was that they were an unnecessary invention. That seemed to me a strange thing to come from Jim. "But, Jim, you are always eating," I said. "Yes," he said, "that's just it. Meals arrange your eating for you. If it wasn't for meals you could go on eating all the time, like a cow." I said, "Who'd be a cow!" "Oh, I don't know," he said. "A nice hot summer afternoon in the shade of a large tree, with all four feet in a pond, and nothing to do but chew—what could be nicer?"

Chewing is like smoking, Jim says, only much less expensive and it does not make you feel sick.

That's what Jim says. Personally I like meals. I like

staying in houses where there is a gong. An uncle of mine used to keep a butler and at the right moment—one of the nicest of the day—he would throw open the door of the room where we all were and cry in a loud voice: "Dinner is served!"

It made dinner seem awfully important.

I like meals in trains. The only thing I don't like about meals in trains is the way the tea slops about. Some people say it slops about on the Southern Railway and not on the Great Western, but I expect there is really as much swilling about on both. The waiters have to be very clever at balancing trays when the train is going at high speed, which may be anything up to a hundred miles an hour. They have to practise for days, on a narrow plank, blind-fold, before they are given the job.

Some countries have very queer meals. In China you are given birds nests and sticks of bamboo and everything is brought in at the same time. I prepared a Chinese meal at home once, for a surprise. But it wasn't a success.

I sometimes spend quite a long time wondering which is the best meal of the day. I think on the whole breakfast because it is so long since one has had one. But it must be a real breakfast with porridge or cereal, eggs and bacon, marmalade and toast.

An uncle of mine—not the one that keeps butlers—said he once had a meal with a friend in a restaurant in London and when they had finished and were coming away the friend asked him what he thought of it. "Very nice," said my uncle. "Now come and have one with me."

The worst kind of meal is tea in a hotel. Hotels don't seem to know what tea is. They bring you two pieces of thin bread and butter and a piece of cake about the size of a piece of cheese. And they call that tea.

I should like to go to the Lord Mayor's Banquet. But I suppose it is not what it was. They used to have real turtles.

There is a good description of a meal in the desert by Lawrence of Arabia. He was asked to a feast by a sheik. Everyone sat round a large cauldron of boiling sheep.



You put your hand in and pulled out what you could, and if you were greedy you probably got very severely burnt.

The great thing about that sort of meal is that the only thing you would have to wash up afterwards would be yourself.

#### THE ART OF QUOTATION

The art of quotation is like all other arts. To a very large extent people are either good at it or they are not. You cannot alter your powers much by your own efforts, practice and so on. Many people will deny this, but listen to the people you hear practising the piano. You may say: "Practice makes perfect." That just shows the dangers of quotation.

You may be bad at quoting because you can never get a quotation right or think of one at all. Or you may be bad at quoting, in another way: the sort of person who always has a quotation on his tongue, who will not let a thing be just simple, it must be "elementary, my dear Watson." It is this sort of rabid quoter who, if you are talking about a girl called Kate, croons softly: "The master, the swabber, the boatswain and I, the gunner and his mate loved Mall, Meg, and Marian and Margery, but none of us cared for Kate." Most offensive.

Quoters can be very disturbing at times. I once spent a holiday in a boarding house where the landlady's husband had been a Shakespearean actor. He often had something funny on his tongue, without apparently knowing it was there. I remember once when someone in a bedroom above upset a basin of water when we were at breakfast, he looked up and said, "It droppeth like the gentle dew from Heaven." It did. And another time when he was dishing out the Irish stew he chanted a sort of dirge to the motions of the spoon—and I really don't think he was thinking at all about what he was saying, but what he said was: "Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog . . ." We were all sniggering down our end of the table, but it was only when he got to "nose of Turk" that his wife realised what he was at and then she shrieked



"Stop it Henry!" I felt sorry for him because I am sure he had not done it on purpose. He just could not help it.

Very often the person who likes quoting merely quotes because he has a good memory for songs and poems and odd sayings, and likes the feel of them on his tongue. I know someone who can start anywhere in any of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas and go on till he gets to the end of the opera. I wish I could. I was once told that Carlyle or it may have been Ruskin used to recite the whole of the Iliad to himself when he was crossing to Ireland, to stave off seasickness. I don't know that it would have that effect on me.

Classical quotations are not anything like as common as they used to be, for obvious reasons. They say that if you are sitting in the Pavilion seats at Lord's you can still sometimes hear the old gentlemen sighing to each other: "Eheu, fugaces, Postume, Postume!" I don't know. I have never had a chance of listening for them there, worse luck!

There was a day when they quoted Latin and Greek at each other in the House of Commons, now they are much more likely to call the honourable member for wherever it is a pin-up girl and she will retort with something that certainly is not Greek or Latin.

During the war Mr. Winston Churchill generally ended his important speeches with something peculiarly apt. His Majesty does this too sometimes in his Christmas broadcasts.

And not by eastern windows only,  
When daylight comes, comes in the light:  
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!  
But westward, look, the land is bright.

Could that have meant as much to the man who wrote it as it did to Churchill and Russia and England and U.S.A. on April 27th, 1941? As our rabid quoter would say: " 'I doubt it,' said the Carpenter."

EXERCISE 56. Write your own version of one of the above essays.

## THE BANANA

The banana are a great remarkable fruit. They are constructed in the same architectural styles as sausage, difference being skin of sausage are habitually consumed, while it is not advisable to eat wrapper of banana. The banana are held aloft while consuming; sausage are usually left in reclining position. Sausage depend for creation on human being or stuffing machine, while banana are pristine product of honourable mother nature. In case of sausage, both conclusions are attached to other sausage; banana on other hand are attached on one end to stem and opposite termination entirely loose. Finally, banana are strictly of vegetable kingdom, while affiliation of sausage often undecided.

Written by a Japanese schoolboy. Notice that, apart from oriental quaintnesses of expression, the boy's effort is by no means without merit, as a preliminary draft.

EXERCISE 57. Examine the above study of the banana for the ideas which the writer has discovered, and expand those ideas into a full-length essay (say, 300 words). Write in the King's (not kimono) English.

EXERCISE 58. To give you practice in *awareness*, we are now going to ask you to describe as vividly as you can everything you can think of—or as many things as will make an essay of about 300–400 words—which remind you and can be expected to remind the reader of the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter.

It happens that the journalist Leigh Hunt has left us two essays which will show you the kind of thing that is wanted. The first he called "A 'Now'—Descriptive of a Hot Day," and the second one begins:

A friend tells us, that having written a "Now,"

descriptive of a hot day, we ought to write another, descriptive of a cold one. . . .

And accordingly he does so. We give an extract from each.

#### A HOT DAY

1. Now labourers look well resting in their white shirts at the doors of rural alehouses. Now an elm is fine there, with a seat under it; and horses drink out of the trough, stretching their yearning necks with loosened collars; and the traveller calls for his glass of ale, having been without one for more than ten minutes; and his horse stands wincing at the flies, giving sharp shivers of his skin, and moving to and fro his ineffectual docked tail. . . .

Now, in town, gossips talk more than ever to one another, in rooms, in doorways, and out of window, always beginning the conversation with saying that the heat is overpowering. Now blinds are let down, and doors thrown open, and flannel waistcoats left off, and cold meat preferred to hot, and wonder expressed why tea continues so refreshing, and people delight to sliver lettuces into bowls, and apprentices water doorways with tin-canisters that lay several atoms of dust. Now fruiterers' shops and dairies look pleasant, and ices are the only things to those who can get them.

#### A COLD DAY

2. Now sounds in general are dull, and smoke out of chimneys looks warm and rich, and birds are pitied, hopping about for crumbs, and the trees look wiry and cheerless, albeit they are still beautiful to imaginative eyes, especially the evergreens, and the birch with boughs like dishevelled hair. Now mud in roads is stiff, and the kennel ices over, and boys make illegal slides in the pathways, and ashes are strewn before doors; or you crunch the snow as you tread, or kick mud-flakes before you, or are horribly muddy in cities. . . .

Now riders look sharp, and horses seem brittle in the legs, and old gentlemen feel so; and coachmen, cabmen, and



others, stand swinging their arms across at their sides to warm themselves; and blacksmiths' shops look pleasant, and potato-shops detestable; the fishmongers' still more so. We wonder how he can live in that splash of wet and cold fish, without even a window.

N.B.—Your essays must be written in the same way as Leigh Hunt writes his: as if the season you are describing were actually there before your eyes.

We have only reproduced about a tenth of each of Leigh Hunt's essays.

## CHAPTER VI

### A FEW WORDS ABOUT LETTER- WRITING

We have already given you what we feel to be the most important hint about letter-writing. Be entertaining. Seek to entertain, to say something that will amuse the recipient. Letter-writing is, or should be, an art, and the ulterior-motive, *Please-send-me-some-more-money*, type of letter is not a worthy product of it.

People often say that they have no time for writing long letters. Without a doubt there is much less time given to the writing of letters now than there used to be. Like other diversions of earlier days, it competes unsuccessfully with the wireless, the gramophone, the cinema, and the football pool. If you want to see what could be done in what is generally regarded as a more leisured age—an age which would certainly have been excessively monotonous and dull, particularly in the winter, if it had not been for man's intelligence—read some of the letters of Horace Walpole, or William Cowper, or Charles Lamb, or numerous ladies of the period. Ladies are commonly said to be the better letter writers, in any age; but do not let that discourage you if you happen to be of the opposite sex: in George Saintsbury's *Letter Book* the proportion of those contributing letters—in a survey of English and Scottish letter-writing from the sixteenth century—is twenty-eight men to five women.

Letters differ from essays in one important particular: they are addressed not to the world in general but to

one person. And this affects our attempt to give you advice. You cannot be expected to write in one and the same way to all the people with whom you correspond. And we cannot be expected to give you any canons of instruction which will be right for all those correspondents. As in conversation, you will, or should, suit the words and idioms to the person you are addressing. It is only the pedants, the bores, and the ill-mannered who do not do this.

In letter-writing, more than in any other form of writing, you are conscious of the particular identity of your readers. Do not therefore despise the letter in your pursuit of prose. It is very valuable, stimulating, and at the same time chastening to be acutely aware of your reader. Nothing is more inclined to make one talk sense than to talk to a wise man, or say something silly than to talk to a fool.

Conversely, when you are writing for the general public or as a piece of routine, it should help you, and make what you write more entertaining, if you address yourself not to the world in general but to someone in particular, even if it be only your form-master. Your form-master may afford your mind no more significance than that bleak and nebulous thing, the general public. But you will find it will reward you (if as we hope you consider an improvement in the quality of your literary output as a reward) to think of him as a person with likes and dislikes not so very different from your own.

If you have got past the stage of having a form-master at all, do not let that deter you. Apply the same process. Ask yourself precisely what kind of persons you are intending to address, and picture



them sitting and listening to you reading your work to them. If you cannot sanguinely hope that what you have written will amuse these imaginary folk, write the essay (or whatever it be) again. It may mean a few sheets of paper for salvage, but these people, who should from now on be your familiars, the ears and voices of your literary conscience, these people are there to be satisfied.

But to return to letters.

With many letters that you will have to write it is largely a matter of etiquette. The conventions are social rather than literary. For instance, the conventional ways of ending a letter are:

Firms and impersonal business	Yours faithfully,
Business officials with whom you are personally acquainted	Yours truly,
Acquaintances	Yours sincerely,
Intimate friends	Yours ever,
Relations	Yours affectionately,
The Inspector of Taxes to his clients	Your obedient servant

Thus does one pass through the varying degrees of cordiality, but one cannot say one does so with any precision. Can one, for instance, really distinguish between the faithfulness and the truth which one commonly professes in taking one's leave of the business house on the one hand and, on the other, of its employee? The friends thou hast, says Polonius, and their adoption tried, Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel. . . . "Yours ever" implies the hoops of steel, but how far, nowadays, have the friends been tried before this form of epistolary valediction is used? And the Inspector of Taxes, though he may cherish

and even honour his victims, can hardly be said exactly to obey them.

It is only when he is on terms of extreme intimacy or in a mood of intense exasperation that the letter writer will be inclined to use endings which are a tribute to his power of invention and a true expression of his feelings.\*

It is also a social convention that one should answer formal invitations in an impersonal style, such as: Mr. (Mrs. or Miss) Blank wishes to thank Mr. and Mrs. Dash for their invitation (details as on invitation card), which he (or she) is delighted to accept. And that when you are writing to someone whom you have never met you should begin the letter "Dear Sir or Madam." The name of the person to whom you are writing is generally written just above.

Quite the most difficult letter to write is the letter of condolence. In common loyalty to one's friends, if not for love of them, the difficulty must be faced. It is no use saying: this task is beyond me. One may feel—it is almost inevitable that one should feel—the

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\* "From the very beginning his letters were couched in an affectionate and paternal style. 'My beloved Winston,' they began, ending usually with a variation of 'Yours to a cinder,' 'Yours till Hell freezes,' or 'Till charcoal sprouts' followed by a P.S. and two or three more pages of pregnant and brilliant matter. I have found it impossible to re-read these letters without sentiments of strong regard for him, his fiery soul, his volcanic energy, his deep creative mind, his fierce outspoken hatreds, his love of England. Alas, there was a day when Hell froze and charcoal sprouted and friendship was reduced to cinders; when 'My beloved Winston' had given place to 'First Lord: I can no longer be your colleague.' I am glad to be able to chronicle that this was not the end of our long and intimate relationship."

Winston S. Churchill of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher:  
*World Crisis, 1911-1914.*

impossibility of writing anything that will bring consolation to the intensely afflicted. But write one must; and on such occasions one should call to mind certain remarks on letter-writing in Walter Raleigh's *On Writing and Writers*:

The writing of letters is only one of the forms of social intercourse in its widest sense. We may talk to a tradesman across the counter or we may send him a letter; we may shake hands with a friend or, finding it impossible to meet him, we may write to him. Many letters express exactly what a shake of the hand would express; what, if we were together, we should express by silence. In letters of this kind it is a familiar experience that there is nothing to say. The whole gist is in the beginning and the end: "Dear Blank, I remain sincerely yours"; the rest is superfluous and a tribute to usage.

Do not therefore on those occasions write too much.

One final word of warning. Do not begin a letter to a personal acquaintance: "Dear Sir". Schoolmasters are probably the chief victims of this peculiarly chilling discourtesy. When a Housemaster and a boy part at the end of term it may be with mixed feelings but it will certainly not be with formality. Yet a few posts later the Housemaster may easily get from the boy a letter: "Dear Sir, I am afraid I have left my ration book, etc., etc."

It is not meant unkindly. The boy addresses his Housemaster as "Sir" when they meet. Why cannot he say "Dear Sir" when he writes? The answer is, Convention. To do so puts the Housemaster on a par with the Editor of *The Times*, the Regional Petroleum Officer and other persons only approachable through a pillar-box. In fact, it dehumanises. And that, even in the first week of the holidays, hurts.



## CHAPTER VII

### PEOPLE TALKING

It is obviously important, in a study of Prose, to consider the various ways in which authors record speech. Speech is a term used in a wider sense to cover the sounds which any kind of animal makes when it wishes to communicate with its fellows, or warn off other animals, or express its pleasure in being alive. The more precise term used for passages of prose or verse in which people talk to one another is *Dialogue*. This includes *duologue* (two people talking to each other) and *monologue* (a speech by one person). There is no essential difference between a *monologue* and a *soliloquy*, though the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* implies that monologues come most frequently from actors on the stage and soliloquies from bores wherever they may lurk.

Broadly speaking, the two chief styles of dialogue are the realistic and the literary. It is sometimes said that a certain person talks like a book. This means that he or she is using terms and a general style of utterance which, if set down on paper, would differ not at all from what could be called prose, or possibly, but much more rarely, poetry.\* Theirs is the literary style.

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\* You may ask, does anyone really speak poetry, if one means by poetry not just the highly emotionalised prose of the orator and prophet, but genuine metrical stanzas? Possibly not. More's the pity. But one remembers Alexander Pope: "As yet a child . . . I lisped in numbers for the numbers came." And the Caliph in Flecker's *Hassan*, of his friend Ishak: These poets *talk* in rhyme.

The lords of the theatre are prejudiced against the literary style because of the generally accepted idea that people seldom converse in precise grammatical periods, and to put them on the stage doing so is to destroy the illusion of actuality. There are exceptions to this, of course; one of the most notable being the Inquisitor's speech in *Saint Joan*. But ordinarily a playwright will not risk more than an occasional paragraph of disquisition.

The novel-reader is a more patient creature than the theatre-goer. If he does not understand a remark he can read it again. He can if need be turn back a few pages and review the whole trend of the dialogue. And because the words are read and not heard, the novelist can allow himself more scope for expressing accurately and fully the thoughts of his characters.

But with him too the choice lies somewhere between the realistic and the literary, between the actual words spoken and taken down by the most mobile of all recording vans, the human memory, and the words which might have been spoken and must be set down if the reader is to understand the thoughts and feelings of the character they help to bring to life. The actual words spoken may not be the best means of doing this. It is the difference between actuality and reality, between life and art.

Consider now the following examples:

### Dialogues

#### I. MR. PICKWICK AND THE CAB-DRIVER

"How old is that horse, my friend?" inquired Mr. Pickwick, rubbing his nose with the shilling he had reserved for the fare.

"Forty-two," replied the driver, eyeing him askant.

"What!" ejaculated Mr. Pickwick, laying his hand upon his notebook. The driver reiterated his former statement. Mr. Pickwick looked very hard at the man's face, but his features were immovable, so he noted down the fact forthwith.

"And how long do you keep him out at a time?" inquired Mr. Pickwick, searching for further information.

"Two or three weeks," replied the man.

"Weeks!" said Mr. Pickwick in astonishment—and out came the note-book again.

"He lives at Pentonwil when he's at home," observed the driver, coolly. "But we seldom takes him home, on account of his weakness."

"On account of his weakness!" reiterated the perplexed Mr. Pickwick.

"He always falls down when he's took out o' the cab," continued the driver, "but when he's in it, we bears him up werry tight, and takes him in werry short, so as he can't werry well fall down; and we've got a pair o' precious large wheels on, so ven he *does* move, they run after him, and he must go on—he can't help it."

Charles Dickens: *Pickwick Papers*.

Acutely realistic. One feels these are the actual words Mr. Pickwick and the driver would have used.

## II. MR. ROCHESTER AND JANE

A waft of wind came sweeping down the laurel walk and trembled through the boughs of the chestnut: it wandered away—away—to an indefinite distance—it died. The nightingale's song was then the only voice of the hour: in listening to it, I again wept. Mr. Rochester sat quiet, looking at me gently and seriously. Some time passed before he spoke; he at last said,—

"Come to my side, Jane, and let us explain and understand one another."

"I will never again come to your side: I am torn away now, and cannot return."



"But, Jane, I summon you as my wife: it is you only I intend to marry."

I was silent: I thought he mocked me.

"Come, Jane—come hither."

"Your bride stands between us."

He rose, and with a stride reached me.

"My bride is here," he said, again drawing me to him, "because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?"

Still I did not answer, and still I writhed myself from his grasp, for I was still incredulous.

"Do you doubt me, Jane?"

"Entirely."

"You have no faith in me?"

"Not a whit."

"Am I a liar in your eyes?" he asked passionately. "Little sceptic, you *shall* be convinced. What love have I for Miss Ingram? None—and that you know. What love has she for me? None—as I have taken pains to prove. I caused a rumour to reach her that my fortune was not a third of what was supposed; and after that I presented myself to see the result: it was coldness both from her and her mother. I would not—I could not—marry Miss Ingram. You—you strange, you almost unearthly thing!—I love as my own flesh. You—poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are—I entreat to accept me as a husband."

"What, me!" I ejaculated, beginning in his earnestness—and especially in his incivility—to credit his sincerity: "me who have not a friend in the world but you—if you are my friend; not a shilling but what you have given me?"

"You, Jane. I must have you for my own—entirely my own. Will you be mine? Say yes, quickly."

"Mr. Rochester, let me look at your face: turn to the moonlight."

"Why?"

"Because I want to read your countenance—turn!"

"There! you will find it scarcely more legible than a

crumpled, scratched page. Read on: only make haste, for I suffer."

Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*.

A man and a woman, deeply in love, might at such a moment as this speak with the tongues of Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre. But it is all excessively rhythmical. It is the language not of real life but of the stage, and only of the stage when it is exploiting its opportunities for arousing emotion. And yet one feels it is written with a passionate sincerity.

Consider the following lines:

"Come to my side, Jane, and let us explain and understand one another."

"I will never again come to your side; I am torn away now, and cannot return."

"But, Jane, I summon you as my wife: it is you only I intend to marry."

This, even for Victorian dialogue, is highly stylised. In each line there are precisely the same number of stresses. It could, in fact, be called a fragment of the *stichomythia* or line-by-line duologue used frequently in Greek drama and occasionally by Shakespeare, Milton and later writers of poetic drama.

Notice also that the emotional quality of the whole passage is intensified by the restraint which the author puts upon herself. The sentences are, nearly all of them, brief and the phraseology is simple throughout.

### III. A DISCUSSION ON FLIGHT

"I have been long of opinion, that instead of the tardy conveyance of ships and chariots, man might use the swifter migration of wings; that the fields of air are open to knowledge, and that only ignorance and idleness need crawl upon the ground."

This hint rekindled the prince's desire of passing the mountains: having seen what the mechanist had already performed, he was willing to fancy that he could do more; yet resolved to inquire further, before he suffered hope to afflict him by disappointment. "I am afraid," said he to the artist, "that your imagination prevails over your skill, and that you now tell me rather what you wish, than what you know. Every animal has his element assigned him: the birds have the air, and man and beasts the earth."—"So," replied the mechanist, "fishes have the water, in which, yet, beasts can swim by nature, and men by art. He that can swim needs not despair to fly: to swim is to fly in a grosser fluid, and to fly is to swim in a subtler. We are only to proportion our power of resistance to the different density of matter through which we are to pass. You will be, necessarily, upborne by the air, if you can renew any impulse upon it, faster than the air can recede from the pressure."

"But the exercise of swimming," said the prince, "is very laborious; the strongest limbs are soon wearied; I am afraid, the act of flying will be yet more violent, and wings will be of no great use, unless we can fly further than we can swim."

"The labour of rising from the ground," said the artist, "will be great, as we see it in the heavier domestic fowls; but as we mount higher, the earth's attraction, and the body's gravity, will be gradually diminished, till we shall arrive at a region, where the man will float in the air without any tendency to fall; no care will then be necessary but to move forwards, which the gentlest impulse will effect. You, sir, whose curiosity is so extensive, will easily conceive with what pleasure a philosopher, furnished with wings, and hovering in the sky, would see the earth, and all its inhabitants, rolling beneath him, and presenting to him, successively, by its diurnal motion, all the countries within the same parallel. How must it amuse the pendent spectator to see the moving scene of land and ocean, cities and deserts! To survey, with equal security, the marts of trade, and the fields of battle; mountains infested by



barbarians, and fruitful regions gladdened by plenty, and lulled by peace!"

Samuel Johnson: *Rasselas*.

EXERCISE 59. Write a passage of dialogue to show how an inventor and a prince might be expected to talk on this theme to-day. (N.B.—You may bring their ideas up to date, particularly about flight in the stratosphere.)

Johnson's pomposity—obvious enough in this extract—was a joke among his friends. Boswell records, April 27, 1773:

Sir Joshua Reynolds was in company with them one day, when Goldsmith said, that he thought he could write a good fable, mentioned the simplicity which that kind of composition requires, and observed, that in most fables the animals introduced seldom talk in character. "For instance, (said he,) the fable of the little fishes, who saw birds fly over their heads, and envying them, petitioned Jupiter to be changed into birds. The skill (continued he,) consists in making them talk like little fishes." While he indulged himself in this fanciful reverie, he observed Johnson shaking his sides, and laughing. Upon which he smartly proceeded, "Why, Dr. Johnson, this is not so easy as you seem to think; for if you were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like *whales*."

#### IV. CONVERSATION AT A DANCE

Mr. Darcy is dancing with Elizabeth Bennet:

Recovering himself, however, shortly, he turned to his partner, and said,—

"Sir William's interruption has made me forget what we were talking of."

"I do not think we were speaking at all. Sir William could not have interrupted any two people in the room who had less to say for themselves. We have tried two or

three subjects already without success, and what we are to talk of next I cannot imagine."

"What think you of books?" said he, smiling.

"Books—oh, no!—I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings."

"I am sorry you think so; but if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject. We may compare our different opinions."

"No—I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else."

"The *present* always occupies you in such scenes—does it?" said he, with a look of doubt.

"Yes, always," she replied, without knowing what she said; for her thoughts had wandered far from the subject, as soon afterwards appeared by her suddenly exclaiming, "I remember hearing you once say, Mr. Darcy, that you hardly ever forgave;—that your resentment, once created, was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its *being created*?"

"I am," said he, with a firm voice.

"And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?"

"I hope not."

"It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion, to be secure of judging properly at first."

"May I ask to what these questions tend?"

"Merely to the illustration of *your* character," said she, endeavouring to shake off her gravity. "I am trying to make it out."

"And what is your success?"

She shook her head. "I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly."

"I can readily believe," answered he, gravely, "that reports may vary greatly with respect to me; and I could wish, Miss Bennet, that you were not to sketch my character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either."

"But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity."

"I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours,"

he coldly replied. She said no more, and they went down the other dance and parted in silence; on each side dissatisfied, though not to an equal degree; for in Darcy's breast there was a tolerably powerful feeling towards her, which soon procured her pardon, and directed all his anger against another.

Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*.

Literary or realistic?

Jane Austen's was an elegant age. There is no reason why two young people should not have spoken like this in a ball-room in her day. There was less likelihood then than now that they would be considered prim or affected.

EXERCISE 60. Give some examples, of about this length, of the conversations that might be expected to take place during a present-day dance between couples who have just been introduced to each other, or know each other rather better than that.



## CHAPTER VIII

### STYLE

A golf pro will sometimes start you off on a course of lessons by throwing a ball on the ground and telling you to hit it. "Don't worry about grip or feet or swing or anything. There is the ball. Hit it as far as you can."

Of course as soon as you have hit the ball he may take your club from you and show you how much further the ball would have gone if you had done this or that. But possibly—it is the substance of many dreams, but not beyond the pale of possibility—when he told you to hit the ball, hit it you did, your club came down smack and the ball sailed on and on and out of sight. You may have done this with the most appalling contortions of the body, but the pro, seeing the ball go screaming off to the horizon, would, if he knew his job, say only: "Well, that is not my way, but it is one way, and if you can do that every time, don't ask me for any more lessons."

So it may be with you. As a novice in the craft of writing you may be like the man who hits the professional's ball to the horizon. If you can express your meaning clearly, if you can charm the most unwilling ear, if you can arouse your reader to mirth or indignation, sympathy or revolt, you have learnt all you need know; and style becomes a matter of academic interest only.

Some people, not so confident of their powers, have spent a strenuous apprenticeship examining and

imitating the style of one famous author after another. Thus did Stevenson, and in an oft-quoted passage (*Memories and Portraits: A College Magazine*) he tells us how he played the "sedulous ape" to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, even to Sir Thomas Browne.\* He says:

Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and again was unsuccessful, and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts.

He does this, you see, not in the hope that he will find among those authors one whose style he can adopt and make his own; he does it simply for practice. And earlier on he has described another exercise which he set himself:

As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside, I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words. And what I thus wrote was for no ulterior use, it was written consciously for practice. It was not so much that I wished to be an author (though I wished that too) as that I had vowed that I would learn to write. That was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practised to acquire it, as men learn to whittle, in a wager with myself.

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\* The authors are worth noting. But compare Walter Raleigh, *On Writing and Composition*: "The thing to aim at in ordinary prose is the Middle Diction. The writers best to learn from for ordinary purposes are Swift, Defoe, Steele, Addison, Hazlitt, Newman, rather than Bacon, Burton, Jeremy Taylor, Lamb, Carlyle, Pater."

This method of acquiring proficiency has more to do with style than at first appears. No one can deliberately mould a style for himself, any more than he can take unto himself the style of another. But if you practise writing for long enough, a style will come.

This means no more than that the way you express yourself to-day will resemble the way you expressed yourself yesterday and the way you will express yourself to-morrow. It may not be a particularly good way nor, we grant, may it be a particularly bad way; it will simply be recognisably your way. It will mean that you have acquired what is generally called an individual style.

But all the time you have been shaping this style of yours you should have been considering whether you are shaping it for the best. As you write, you should have beside you a dictionary and a copy of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. This latter will help you to consider carefully the precise meaning of every word you feel inclined to use, and it will put before you some engaging examples of the curious things that occur in print when people who would never think of shaving with a pair of garden secateurs commit the same sort of abuse of function with words.

It is possible that you may be glad of more positive direction. We are therefore going to put before you some examples of well-written English prose. A comprehensive gallery of the styles is beyond the scope of this book: all we can do here is to bring to your notice some styles that are neither pretentious nor bombastic nor obscure nor dull.

If you want to get the full flavour of the style, read the passage aloud. If you want to test the quality of



anything you have yourself written, read it aloud. Read it aloud to yourself when you are feeling at your worst. Read it to the most obtuse listener you can find. If he can understand you, the world will; if he will hear you to the end, there is probably little wrong with your style.

It may seem to you difficult to write clearly and simply. It is. Many people are paid large sums to sit in offices and do it. To get into those offices they had to pass very severe examinations. And yet they fail. Evidences of their failure litter His Majesty's Stationery Office and whiten the heads of His Majesty's subjects. It is difficult.

One must in fairness admit that they do not always fail. Read the account of the Battle of Britain, published by H.M. Stationery Office in 1941. Read the advertisements which from time to time the War Office puts in the papers to encourage you or your sons or your grandsons to join the Regular Army. Read *The A B C of Cookery*, produced by the Ministry of Food in 1945. These are well written. And they are not the only ones.

Now it is quite as possible for you to write well. Remember this: if your mind is wholly on what you are trying to say, and if you are thinking clearly about it, you will probably express yourself clearly.

And it is worth considering how much truth there is in the converse of this. If you want to get something—an opinion, a lecture, or a speech—clear in your mind, set it down on paper. There may be many crossings out before you have it as you want it to be, but do not worry about this; write it and patiently rewrite it and if need be rewrite it again, unfailing patience is all that matters and when the moment comes for you to

express your opinion or give your lecture or make your speech you will be grateful for all the time you have spent in putting your tangle of ideas into some sort of order upon a framework of prose.

We have spoken here of simple, clear statement—in other words, lucidity—as one of the cardinal virtues of prose. It is more than that: it is *the* cardinal virtue. But this does not mean that when you have called a spade a spade you have run the whole gamut of expression and exhausted all the powers latent in English prose. Your style must suit your theme. The art of writing is the art of choosing the right style as well as the right word. Simplicity is a virtue, but it is not the only virtue, and English literature would be nothing, or at any rate hardly fit for export, if it could not blaze also its glories and its eccentricities.

*In garden delights*, says Sir Thomas Browne,\* 'tis not easy to hold a mediocrity; that insinuating pleasure is seldom without some extremity. And this, when you have worked out what it means, you will find applies also to style. But as God Almighty first planted a garden, so God, and God alone, can perfect in you the insinuating pleasure that is style.

For those who wish to explore the subject further there is Herbert Read's excellent study of *English Prose Style*. Middleton Murry's *The Problem of Style* and Walter Raleigh's *On Writing and Writers* will also be helpful, particularly, in this latter, the author's remarks on Writing and Composition, one of which we have quoted here. George Saintsbury will take the enthusiast further still in his *History of English Prose*

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\* *The Garden of Cyrus*, "Epistle Dedicatory."



*Rhythm.* But this is difficult ground for the novice and many accomplished writers have confessed themselves lost in it.

Modern prose style can be seen at its best, and in all its diversity, in E. A. Greening Lambourn's *Present-day Prose*. This provides a comprehensive and wholly admirable collection of passages by the chief novelists and essayists of this century.

#### I. THE SPIDER AND THE BEE

Things were at this crisis, when a material accident fell out. For, upon the highest corner of a large window, there dwelt a certain spider, swollen up to the first magnitude by the destruction of infinite numbers of flies, whose spoils lay scattered before the gates of his palace, like human bones before the cave of some giant. The avenues of his castle were guarded with turnpikes, and palisadoes, all after the modern way of fortification. After you had passed several courts, you came to the centre, wherein you might behold the constable himself in his own lodgings, which had windows fronting to each avenue, and ports to sally out, upon all occasions of prey or defence. In this mansion he had for some time dwelt in peace and plenty, without danger to his person, by swallows from above, or to his palace, by brooms from below: when it was the pleasure of fortune to conduct thither a wandering bee, to whose curiosity a broken pane in the glass had discovered itself, and in he went; where expatiating a while, he at last happened to alight upon one of the outward walls of the spider's citadel; which, yielding to the unequal weight, sunk down to the very foundation. Thrice he endeavoured to force his passage, and thrice the centre shook. The spider within, feeling the terrible convulsion, supposed at first, that nature was approaching to her final dissolution; or else, that Beelzebub, with all his legions, was come to revenge the death of many thousands of his subjects, whom his enemy had slain and devoured. However, he at length



valiantly resolved to issue forth, and meet his fate. Meanwhile the bee had acquitted himself of his toils, and posted securely at some distance, was employed in cleansing his wings, and disengaging them from the ragged remnants of the cobweb. By this time the spider was adventured out, when beholding the chasms, the ruins, and dilapidations of his fortress, he was very near at his wits' end; he stormed and swore like a mad-man, and swelled till he was ready to burst.

Jonathan Swift: *The Battle of the Books*.

There is a mock-heroic extravagance of phrase here and all the detail of this little world is set out with a solemn and masterly deliberation. One feels that a man who can describe like this an encounter between a spider and a bee could describe anything. It is merely a question of scale.

## II. OLIVER TWIST ASKS FOR MORE

The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end: out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal times. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer, and no more—except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one

boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cook-shop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel *per diem*, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

"Please, sir, I want some more."

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

"What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said:

"Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!"

There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

"For *more!*" said Mr. Limbkins. "Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?"

"He did, sir," replied Bumble.

"That boy will be hung," said the gentleman in the white waistcoat. "I know that boy will be hung."

Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist*.

Notice the simplicity of it all. The sentences are, most of them, short, and as the incident reaches its climax they become shorter.

Notice also how effective the device of repetition can be.

### III. THE HOMING PIGEON

They had walked nearly to the end of the platform, beyond the end of the station roof, and were standing in the open air beside the engine.

"Let the door fall," said the porter. "Hold up the basket. . . . There she goes. . . ."

The wicker door fell open. The shining bronze and grey head of the pigeon showed for a moment. Pink claws gripped the edge of the door. The basket was suddenly lighter, and Roger felt as if he himself had tossed the pigeon up into the air. It flew up above the roof, above the drifting white steam from the engine, and swung round in circles above the house tops, above the cricket ground, while the porter and Titty and Roger watched it. The engine-driver and the fireman leaned out from the footboard to see it too. Suddenly, when it was already no more than a circling grey speck, hard to see in the dazzling summer sky, the pigeon seemed to make up its mind and was off, north-west, straight into the sun, towards the blue hills of the lake country.

Arthur Ransome: *Pigeon Post*.

Concentration on the essential detail is the secret of good story-telling, the secret for that matter of all art.



*The basket was suddenly lighter, and Roger felt as if he himself had tossed the pigeon up into the air.* This is not only keen observation, it is personal experience of the action described. No one would have put that detail in if he had not himself at some time or other done something of the same sort.

The style? You may say there is not much in the style. Perhaps all we need say is that it takes some people a great deal of effort, a great deal of restraint, to tell a story as simply as this.

#### IV. SIR GARETH AND THE BROWN KNIGHT

Then Sir Gareth rode a great pace till he came to a castle, and there he heard much mourning of ladies and gentlewomen. So there came by him a page. What noise is this, said Sir Gareth, that I hear within this castle? Sir knight, said the page, here be within this castle thirty ladies, and all they be widows; for there is a knight that waiteth daily upon this castle, and his name is the brown knight without pity, and he is the perilous knight that now liveth; and therefore sir, said the page, I rede you flee. Nay, said Sir Gareth, I will not flee though thou be afeard of him. And then the page saw where came the brown knight; Lo, said the page, yonder he cometh. Let me deal with him, said Sir Gareth. And when either of other had a sight, they let their horses run; and the brown knight brake his spear; and Sir Gareth smote him throughout the body, that he overthrew him to the ground stark dead.

Sir Thomas Malory: *Morte d'Arthur*.

You will observe that neither in this piece of narrative, nor in the one before, is there a single metaphor or simile. "Let me deal with him, said Sir Gareth": that was written getting on for five hundred years ago, but people—some people—still deal with brown knights with just those words on their lips. If Sir Gareth had

said: "What sort of a knight does he think I am?" It would not have sounded out of place, so permanent in our language is the tradition of simplicity.

#### V. MONGOOSE *v.* COBRA

Then he jumped. The head was lying a little clear of the water-jar, under the curve of it; and, as his teeth met, Rikki braced his back against the bulge of the red earthenware to hold down the head. This gave him just one second's purchase, and he made the most of it. Then he was battered to and fro as a rat is shaken by a dog—to and fro on the floor, up and down, and round in great circles; but his eyes were red, and he held on as the body cart-whipped over the floor, upsetting the tin dipper and the soap-dish and the flesh-brush, and banged against the tin side of the bath. As he held he closed his jaws tighter and tighter, for he made sure he would be banged to death, and, for the honour of his family, he preferred to be found with his teeth locked. He was dizzy, aching, and felt shaken to pieces when something went off like a thunderclap just behind him; a hot wind knocked him senseless, and red fire singed his fur. The big man had been awakened by the noise, and had fired both barrels of a shot-gun into Nag just behind the hood.

Rudyard Kipling: *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*.

Again, there are few similes and as few metaphors. How much do these contribute to the vividness of the scene?

#### VI. THE BISHOP PROTESTS

"Shall Joy wear what Grief has fashioned?" said the young King. And he told his three dreams.

And when the Bishop had heard them he knit his brows, and said, "My son, I am an old man, and in the winter of my days, and I know that many evil things are done in the wide world. The fierce robbers come down from the mountains, and carry off the little children, and sell them to the Moors. The lions lie in wait for the caravans, and

leap upon the camels. The wild boar roots up the corn in the valley, and the foxes gnaw the vines upon the hill. The pirates lay waste the sea-coast and burn the ships of the fishermen, and take their nets from them. In the salt-marshes live the lepers; they have houses of wattled reeds, and none may come nigh them. The beggars wander through the cities, and eat their food with the dogs. Canst thou make these things not to be? Will thou take the leper for thy bedfellow, and set the beggar at thy board? Shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee? Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art? Wherefore I praise thee not for this that thou hast done, but I bid thee ride back to the Palace and make thy face glad, and put on the raiment that beseemeth a king, and with the crown of gold I will crown thee, and the sceptre of pearl will I place in thy hand. And as for thy dreams, think no more of them. The burden of this world is too great for one man to bear, and the world's sorrow too heavy for one heart to suffer."

"Sayest thou that in this house?" said the young King, and he strode past the Bishop, and climbed up the steps of the altar, and stood before the image of Christ.

He stood before the image of Christ, and on his right hand and on his left were the marvellous vessels of gold, the chalice with the yellow wine, and the vial with the holy oil. He knelt before the image of Christ, and the great candles burned brightly by the jewelled shrine, and the smoke of the incense curled in thin blue wreaths through the dome. He bowed his head in prayer, and the priests in their stiff copes crept away from the altar.

Oscar Wilde: *The Young King*.

The word *pastiche* means a deliberate imitation of the style of another author or age, and here we have an example of one. The simplicity of this passage, of many of Wilde's stories, is not a natural simplicity. *The Young King* is a parable, and Wilde uses the style and phraseology of the famous Gospel parables. The



result is impressive. There is no need to decry a style because it is not original. Very few authors are capable of doing better than imitate the best.

The following parable provides an interesting comparison. The style is fundamentally the same, the differences we leave you to discover.

#### VII. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds; but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

The Gospel according to Saint Matthew.

#### VIII. WAR-TIME

(a) Helen Button started out with her dog William. As they were walking along suddenly William stopped and was very nervous. He saw something on the road and so did Helen. They neither of them knew what it was at

first and at last as they approached very carefully they saw it was a bottle, a bottle standing up right in the middle of the road. There had been something in the bottle but what, it looked dark green or may be blue or black, and the bottle was standing up in the middle of the road not lying on its side the way a bottle on the road usually is.

William the dog and Helen the little girl went on. They did not look back at the bottle. But of course it was still there because they had not touched it.

That is war-time.

(b) Helen Button thought that in war-time there was not any difference between day and night. And she was right. The nights were black and the days were dark and there was no morning. Not in war-time.

Gertrude Stein: *Paris, France.*

This is one of the most interesting and one of the most vital of modern styles. Again, there is an almost Biblical simplicity (but very different from Wilde's). Compare, for instance, *The nights were black and the days were dark and there was no morning* with *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea* (The Revelation of Saint John).

Sometimes Gertrude Stein is more deliberately repetitive in her phraseology. But notice how in example (a) she draws our attention to that sinister solitary object in the road. Bottle . . . bottle . . . bottle . . . echoes through the whole anecdote, so that the thing itself comes to haunt us, as it haunted Helen and her dog. It is a rhetorical device, and rhetorical is just what Gertrude Stein's style is, not in the fashion of a public speech, but quietly, as a friend might be who at home of an evening imparts to us recollections intensely felt.

There are some styles which should be patented to

preserve the world from inferior imitations of them. Such is Gertrude Stein's.

So far we have dealt with one kind of prose only: narrative prose. It is difficult, and there is really no need, to classify or categorise prose, but one can say that when people write prose they want to do one of three things: they want to tell a story or describe something or persuade their readers to adopt a particular course of action or thought.

Some people have called this last, the persuasive kind of prose, *emotive* prose. But in fact emotion tends to enter into all kinds of prose. It is true that one can describe, let us say, an animal, a vegetable or a mineral with a detachment that is scientific and entire. But, ordinarily, few of us can write of even quite trivial things without feeling an emotional response in ourselves and requiring one from others. The desire to arouse emotion in others is one of the commonest motives for writing, and when you have succeeded in arousing it, or when you have studied the passages that follow—and indeed the narrative passages as well—you will discover that emotion is conveyed in prose as much by style as by content.

#### IX. AN EARTHQUAKE IN VALDIVIA

February 20th, 1835. This day has been memorable in the annals of Valdivia, for the most severe earthquake experienced by the oldest inhabitant. I happened to be on shore, and was lying down in the wood to rest myself. It came on suddenly, and lasted two minutes, but the time appeared much longer. The rocking of the ground was very sensible. The undulations appeared to my companion and myself to come from due east, whilst others



thought they proceeded from south-west: this shows how difficult it sometimes is to perceive the direction of the vibrations. There was no difficulty in standing upright, but the motion made me almost giddy: it was something like the movement of a vessel in a little cross-ripple, or still more like that felt by a person skating over thin ice, which bends under the weight of his body.

A bad earthquake at once destroys our oldest associations: the earth, the very emblem of solidarity, has moved beneath our feet like a thin crust over a fluid;—one second of time has created in the mind a strange idea of insecurity, which hours of reflection would not have produced. In the forest, as a breeze moved the trees, I felt only the earth tremble, but saw no other effect. Captain FitzRoy and some officers were at the town during the shock, and there the scene was more striking; for although the houses, from being built of wood, did not fall, they were violently shaken, and the boards creaked and rattled together. The people rushed out of doors in the greatest alarm. It is these accompaniments that create that perfect horror of earthquakes, experienced by all who have thus seen, as well as felt, their effects. Within the forest it was a deeply interesting, but by no means an awe-exciting phenomenon. The tides were very curiously affected. The great shock took place at the time of low water; and an old woman who was on the beach told me, that the water flowed very quickly, but not in great waves, to high-water mark, and then as quickly returned to its proper level; this was also evident by the line of wet sand. This same kind of quick but quiet movement in the tide happened a few years since at Chiloe, during a slight earthquake, and created much causeless alarm. In the course of the evening there were many weaker shocks, which seemed to produce in the harbour the most complicated currents, and some of great strength.

Charles Darwin: *The Voyage of the Beagle*.

An excellent piece of scientific description. It may be that seismography has no technical terms of its own,

but that would not have prevented some writers from using the kind of laboratory jargon which Darwin manages superbly to avoid. He is not writing down to his readers, but he describes cause, effect and impression in words and phrases that the humblest can understand. Notice the importance of the following: *undulations, vibrations, crust, reflection, awe-exciting phenomenon, complicated currents*; you can best do this by suggesting alternative words and phrases that he might have used.

#### X. THE TROUT AND THE FLY

A great deal may be learnt of the behaviour of trout on bright days, when they can be seen in the water. Let us suppose that a good fish is seen feeding where the angler can get into position and prepare to cast without disturbing it. The fly is thrown above the trout, which may of course take fright at once and rush off to its shelter, and if so there is an end; but short of this the trout may drop slowly down stream and go quietly away, or may just sink in the water and cease feeding. Assuming, however, that the trout takes no offence at the first cast, it may then take the fly with hesitation, as if it were making an experiment, or with confidence as if the fly were exactly like a natural one, or with an appearance of rapture, as if the angler's fly were the one thing for which it had been waiting; or finally, the trout may take a middle course between the two possible extremes of fear and confidence, and either take no notice whatever of the fly or move to it and refuse it. It is desperate work to continue to cast over a fish which never takes any notice, but as long as a trout makes any movement towards the fly it is worth while to go on fishing for it and to try a change of fly. Sometimes a new fly of the same pattern will succeed where a much used one has failed, and a change of the size of fly may be as important as a change of pattern. Now and then the trout is so interested in the fly that it leaves its place and comes down



stream, inspecting the fly closely as it floats: sometimes this ends in the trout taking the fly, at others in its coming down stream till it sees the angler. Occasionally it neither sees him nor takes the fly and goes slowly back to its feeding place; and in any case the angler's only chance is to keep perfectly still and make no movement, unless the fly is actually taken.

Sir Edward Grey: *Fly Fishing*.

Is it being too fanciful to suggest that this, like the fly cast perfectly upon the water, falls upon the ear as light as thistledown? Watch the successive subjects of the sentences: the occasions when the author uses a noun and the occasions when he uses a pronoun. Ask yourself what the effect would be if, in any sentence or sentences, he had used a pronoun instead of a noun or a noun instead of a pronoun.

#### XI. WAGES AND WITS

Only a few days since I had a letter from the wife of a village rector, a man of common sense and kindness, who was greatly troubled in his mind because it was precisely the men who got highest wages in summer that came destitute to his door in the winter. Destitute, and of riotous temper—for their method of spending wages in their period of prosperity was by sitting two days a week in the tavern parlour, ladling port wine, not out of bowls, but out of buckets. Well, gentlemen, who taught them that method of festivity?

Thirty years ago, I, a most inexperienced freshman, went to my first college supper; at the head of the table sat a nobleman of high promise and admirable powers, since dead of palsy; there also we had in the midst of us, not buckets, indeed, but bowls as large as buckets; there also, we helped ourselves with ladles. There (for this beginning of college education was compulsory) I choosing ladlefuls of punch instead of claret, because I was then able, unperceived, to pour them into my waist-coat instead of down



my throat, stood it out to the end, and helped to carry four of my fellow students, one of them the son of the head of a college, head foremost, down stairs and home.

Such things are no more; but the fruit of them remains, and will for many a day to come. The labourers whom you cannot now shut out of the ale-house are only the too faithful disciples of the gentlemen who were wont to shut themselves into the dining-room. The gentlemen have not thought it necessary, in order to correct their own habits, to diminish their incomes; and, believe me, the way to deal with your drunken workman is not to lower his wages,—but to mend his wits.

John Ruskin: *The Crown of Wild Olive*.

The whole argument here is an antithesis (see page 170), so it is natural that the concluding paragraph should hold the moral of it all clinched in a number of balanced sentences: *labourers—ale-house: gentlemen—dining-room . . . habits—incomes: wages—wits*. Notice also the neat and rhetorically effective little piece of visualisation: *head foremost, down stairs and home*. And the pocket sermon, the walnut-shell sermon, contained in the four words: *since dead of palsy*.

## XII. TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE EARL OF CHESTERFIELD

My Lord,

I have been lately informed, by the proprietor of the *World*, that two papers, in which my *Dictionary* is recommended to the publick, were written by your Lordship. To be so distinguished, is an honour, which, being very little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

When, upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your Lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address; and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du*

*vainqueur de la terre*;—that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world contending; but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in publick, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

Seven years, my Lord, have now past, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a Patron before.

The shepherd in Virgil grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks.

Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or be unwilling that the publick should consider me as owing that to a Patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself.

Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less; for I have been long wakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation.

My Lord,

Your Lordship's most humble,

Most obedient servant,

SAMUEL JOHNSON.



Johnson was considered ponderous even by his own age. We have quoted on page 135 Goldsmith's famous retort about his making even little fishes talk like whales. But where the weightiness of a whale is wanted, what could be better than : *but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it ; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it ; till I am known, and do not want it ?* This is more than hitting the nail on the head ; it is three sledge-hammers at work upon one wedge : *till I am indifferent, till I am solitary, till I am known*,—stroke follows stroke as if someone were beating time, each clause is strength suspended and after each rhythmical pause comes the full force of the blow : *and cannot enjoy it, and cannot impart it, and do not want it.*

### XIII. ALL INDIA WAS PRESENT TO THE EYE OF HIS MIND

His knowledge of India was such as few, even of those Europeans who have passed many years in that country, have attained, and such as certainly was never attained by any public man who had not quitted Europe. He had studied the history, the laws, and the usages of the East with an industry such as is seldom found united to so much genius and so much sensibility. Others have perhaps been equally laborious, and have collected an equal mass of materials. But the manner in which Burke brought his higher powers of intellect to work on statements of facts, and on tables of figures, was peculiar to himself. In every part of those huge bales of Indian information which repelled almost all other readers, his mind, at once philosophical and poetical, found something to instruct or to delight. His reason analysed and digested those vast and shapeless masses ; his imagination animated and coloured them. Out of darkness, and dullness, and confusion, he formed a multitude of ingenious theories and vivid pictures. He had, in the highest degree, that noble faculty whereby man is able to live in the past and in the future, in the



distant and in the unreal. India and its inhabitants were not to him, as to most Englishmen, mere names and abstractions, but a real country and a real people. The burning sun, the strange vegetation of the palm and the cocoa tree, the rice-field, the tank, the huge trees, older than the Mogul empire, under which the village crowds assemble, the thatched roof of the peasant's hut, the rich tracery of the mosque where the imaum prays with his face to Mecca, the drums, and banners, and gaudy idols, the devotee swinging in the air, the graceful maiden, with the pitcher on her head, descending the steps to the riverside, the black faces, the long beards, the yellow streaks of sect, the turbans and the flowing robes, the spears and the silver maces, the elephants with their canopies of state, the gorgeous palanquin of the prince, and the close litter of the noble lady, all these things were to him as the objects amidst which his own life had been passed, as the objects which lay on the road between Beaconsfield and St. James's Street. All India was present to the eye of his mind, from the halls where suitors laid gold and perfumes at the feet of sovereigns to the wild moor where the gipsy camp was pitched, from the bazaar, humming like a bee-hive with the crowd of buyers and sellers, to the jungle where the lonely courier shakes his bunch of iron rings to scare away the hyenas. He had just as lively an idea of the insurrection at Benares as of Lord George Gordon's riots, and of the execution of Nuncomar as of the execution of Dr. Dodd. Oppression in Bengal was to him the same thing as oppression in the streets of London.

Lord Macaulay: *Essay on Warren Hastings*.

The important thing to study here is the way Macaulay prevents his panorama from developing into a mere catalogue. The sequence of ideas is also interesting. First we are given a description of "the manner in which Burke brought his higher powers of intellect to work on statements of facts," etc.; then the Indian scene in all its rich contrasts, the colour

splashed on thick but the detail as stereoscopic as in any Frith canvas; and finally, to get Macaulay back to his main theme—the trial of Warren Hastings—the explanation of Burke's absorption in all these things: *oppression in Bengal*. . . .

#### XIV. DOPE

Then suddenly would come a dream of far different character—a tumultuous dream—commencing with a music such as now I often heard in sleep—music of preparation and of awakening suspense. The undulations of fast-gathering tumults were like the opening of the Coronation Anthem; and, like *that*, gave the feeling of a multitudinous movement, of infinite cavalcades filing off, and the tread of innumerable armies. The morning was come of a mighty day—a day of crisis and of ultimate hope for human nature, then suffering mysterious eclipse, and labouring in some dread extremity. Somewhere, but I knew not where—somehow, but I knew not how—by some beings, but I knew not by whom—a battle, a strife, an agony, was travelling through all its stages—was evolving itself, like the catastrophe of some mighty drama, with which my sympathy was the more insupportable, from deepening confusions as to its local scene, its cause, its nature, and its undecipherable issue. I (as is usual in dreams where, of necessity, we make ourselves central to every movement) had the power, and yet had not the power, to decide it. I had the power, if I could raise myself to will it; and yet again had not the power, for the weight of twenty Atlantics was upon me, or the oppression of inextinguishable guilt. “Deeper than ever plummet sounded,” I lay inactive. Then, like a chorus, the passion deepened. Some greater interest was at stake, some mightier cause, than ever yet the sword had pleaded, or trumpet had proclaimed. Then came sudden alarms; hurryings to and fro, trepidations of innumerable fugitives; I knew not whether from the good cause or the bad; darkness and lights; tempest and human faces; and at last, with the



sense that all was lost, female forms, and the features that were worth all the world to me; and but a moment allowed—and clasped hands, with heart-breaking partings, and then—everlasting farewells! and, with a sigh such as the caves of hell sighed when the incestuous mother uttered the abhorred name of Death, the sound was reverberated—everlasting farewells! and again, and yet again reverberated—everlasting farewells!

And I awoke in struggles, and cried aloud, "I will sleep no more!"

De Quincey: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

To some people, bred up to think of style as a purely functional thing—that style being best which does no more than aid comprehension most—this will seem a mere orgy of long words. Others may feel that De Quincey has mistaken his medium, that this would be better as a symphony, that no one should try to be a Sibelius in prose.

Says Walter Pater—and it is one of the most pregnant remarks a critic has ever made: *All art constantly aspires to the condition of music*. You can blame an artist for doing in one medium what can be done better in another. He may be wrong to try to do, in the medium over which he has some mastery, what can be done better in another. Remonstrances will only start an argument about the potentialities of, in this case, prose. And we would remind you of what we have said earlier on, that in English literature simplicity is not the only virtue.

There is another point about this. Every sentence, every phrase, every syllable is here meant to contribute to the general effect of brooding terror. The style is significantly and appropriately *memorable*—and "memorable speech" has been used as a definition of poetry.



Is De Quincey, then, aspiring to the condition of poetry?

All we can say on this very difficult subject, the difference between poetry and prose, is that between the conventional styles of poetry and the conventional styles of prose there lies a terrain that the explorer-critic maps down sometimes as poetry and sometimes as prose. His grandfather would have shown it all as prose and his grandson may show it all as poetry. If you want evidence in print of this change in attitude towards what is sometimes called prose-poetry—and what name could be better?—compare the ways Chapters 27 and 49 of the Book of Genesis are set out in the Authorised Version of the Bible and in the Revised Version. Another frequently used “test case” is the “poetry” of Walt Whitman. Few people now would call it anything but poetry; his contemporaries called it many other things.

By way of contrast to the orchestrations of De Quincey, here is the much quoted conclusion to the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*. De Quincey may have persuaded you that magnificence in prose is just a matter of using long words. This passage should provide the necessary corrective. How many words does Bunyan use here of more than two syllables?

#### XV. SO HE PASSED OVER

After this, it was noised abroad that Mr. Valiant-for-truth was taken with a Summons, by the same Post as the other, and had this for a Token that the Summons was true, *That his Pitcher was broken at the Fountain*. When he understood it, he called for his Friends, and told them of it. Then said he, I am going to my Fathers, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me

of all the Trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My Sword, I give to him that shall succeed me in my Pilgrimage, and my *Courage* and *Skill*, to him that can get it. My *Marks* and *Scars* I carry with me, to be a Witness for me, that I have fought his Battles who now will be my Rewarder. When the Day that he must go hence, was come, many accompanied him to the River side, into which, as he went, he said, *Death, where is thy Sting?* And as he went down deeper, he said, *Grave, where is thy Victory?* So he passed over, and the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

John Bunyan.

## CHAPTER IX

### INGREDIENTS, GOOD AND BAD

#### 1. Adjective versus Verb

Stevenson was giving a young friend lessons in the making of prose. He asked her to describe her own garden. When she showed him what she had written he said he had never in his life read anything worse. This provoked the pardonable retort: "But how ought it to have been done?"

"You should have used fewer adjectives and many more descriptive verbs," came the swift reply. "If you want me to see your garden, don't, for pity's sake, talk about 'climbing roses' or 'green, mossy lawns.' Tell me, if you like, that roses twined themselves round the apple trees and fell in showers from the branches. Never dare to tell me again anything about 'green grass.' Tell me how the lawn was flecked with shadows. I know perfectly well that grass is green. So does everybody else in England. What you have to learn is something different from that. Make me see what it was that made your garden distinct from a thousand others." \*

Consider, in the light of this advice, the following description of a garden:

It was superb, the great lawn at Earlham—it really was. I have described how it was lifted up almost to the level, I should think, of the first-floor windows, by a steep bank of shaven grass; but there was a considerable expanse on the lower level too, before you reached the bank. On this lower lawn, to right and left, there was a fantastic medley

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\* This, and a vivid description of Stevenson's sternness, ruthlessness almost as a teacher, will be found in *R.L.S. and his Sine Qua Non*, by the Gamekeeper (Adelaide A. Boodle).



of flower-beds, cut in queer shapes, coils and lozenges and hoops; and the gardener's fancy ran strangely riot, year by year, in selecting and disposing the flowers that filled them. Geraniums roasting-red, French marigolds orange and mahogany-coloured, the tomato-note of waxen begonias, exotic herbage all speckled and pied and ring-straked, dahlias, calceolarias—they were marshalled and massed together, they fought it out as they would. But indeed they were mastered by the sunshine, by the glaze of light in which they flashed and twinkled; and they fell back, right and left, leaving a wide space of clear clean grass unbroken. And then there rose before you the green bank, so steep that I wonder how the mowing-machine contrived to sidle along it and keep it thus smoothly shaven.

Percy Lubbock: *Earlham*.

Consider also this. As in any brilliant description, every word is significant. But watch particularly those verbs:

Doc was collecting marine animals in the Great Tide Pool on the tip of the Peninsula. It is a fabulous place; when the tide is in, a wave-churned basin, creamy with foam, whipped by the combers that roll in from the whistling buoy on the reef. But when the tide goes out the little water world becomes quiet and lovely. The sea is very clear and the bottom becomes fantastic with hurrying, fighting, feeding, breeding animals. Crabs rush from frond to frond of the waving algae. Starfish squat over mussels and limpets, attach their million little suckers and then slowly lift with incredible power until the prey is broken from the rock. And then the starfish stomach comes out and envelopes its food. Orange and speckled and fluted nudibranchs slide gracefully over the rocks, their skirts waving like the dresses of Spanish dancers. And black eels poke their heads out of crevices and wait for prey. The snapping shrimps with their trigger claws pop loudly. The lovely, coloured world is glassed over. Hermit crabs like frantic children scamper on the bottom

sand. And now one, finding an empty snail shell he likes better than his own, creeps out, exposing his soft body to the enemy for a moment, and then pops into the new shell. A wave breaks over the barrier, and churns the glassy water for a moment and mixes bubbles into the pool, and then it clears and is tranquil and lovely and murderous again. Here a crab tears a leg from his brother. The anemones expand like soft and brilliant flowers, inviting any tired and perplexed animal to lie for a moment in their arms, and when some small crab or little tide-pool Johnnie accepts the green and purple invitation, the petals whip in, the stringing cells shoot tiny narcotic needles into the prey and it grows weak and perhaps sleepy while the searing caustic digestive acids melt its body down.

Then the creeping murderer, the octopus, steals out, slowly, softly, moving like a grey mist, pretending now to be a bit of weed, now a rock, now a lump of decaying meat, while its evil goat eyes watch coldly. It oozes and flows toward a feeding crab, and as it comes close its yellow eyes burn and its body turns rosy with the pulsing colour of anticipation and rage. Then suddenly it runs lightly on the tip of its arms, as ferociously as a charging cat. It leaps savagely on the crab, there is a puff of black fluid, and the struggling mass is obscured in the sepia cloud while the octopus murders the crab. On the exposed rocks out of water, the barnacles bubble behind their closed doors and the limpets dry out. And down to the rocks come the black flies to eat anything they can find.

John Steinbeck: *Cannery Row*.

## 2. Analogy

The Analogy is an elaboration of the simile by means of which (generally) the natural behaviour of things is called in to suggest, by comparison, the truth of an abstract idea. Unfortunately the world of nature seldom provides a process exactly identical with the habit of the abstract idea which one is anxious to impart, so that analogies are sometimes confusing and



sometimes logically unsound. Consider the following examples. You will find that each of Bulwer-Lytton's paragraphs concludes with an analogy, and you are to ask yourself how far each one helps you to understand what he is trying to explain to you.

In every good prose-writer there will be found a certain harmony of sentence, which cannot be displaced without injury to his meaning. His own ear has accustomed itself to regular measurements of time, to which his thoughts learn mechanically to regulate their march. And in prose, as in verse, it is the pause, be it long or short, which the mind is compelled to make, in order to accommodate its utterance to the ear, that serves to the completer formation of the ideas conveyed; for words, like waters, would run off to their own waste were it not for the checks that compress them. Water-pipes can only convey their stream so long as they resist its pressure, and every skilled workman knows that he cannot expect them to last unless he smooth, with care, the material of which they are composed. For reasons of its own, prose has therefore a rhythm of its own.

It is not, then, that rhythm should be cultivated only for the sake of embellishment, but also for the sake of perspicuity; the culture of rhythm in prose defeats its own object, and results in obscurity, if it seek to conceal poverty of thought by verbal decorations. Its uses, on the contrary, are designed for severe thinkers, though its charm may be insensibly felt by the most ordinary reader,—its uses are based on the common-sense principle, that the more the mind is compelled to linger on the thought, the more the thought itself is likely to emerge, clear and distinct, in the words which it ultimately selects: so metals, opaque in the mass, are made translucent by the process of solution.

Bulwer-Lytton: *Essays*.

Now for some apt analogies. In another connection we have already quoted Samuel Johnson's "Is



not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?" That is poignantly apt.

There are plenty of good analogies in Bacon's *Essays*. It is natural that he should frequently use an analogy as his themes are often of a philosophic type: he is pointing a moral or preaching an attitude of mind. Here are two examples:

Men fear *Death*, as Children fear to go in the dark: and as that Natural Fear in Children, is increased with Tales, so is the other.

*Of Death.*

*Planting* of Countries, is like *Planting* of Woods; for you must make account, to leese almost Twenty years Profit, and expect your Recompence, in the end. For the Principal Thing, that hath been the Destruction of most Plantations, hath been the Base, and Hastie drawing of Profit, in the first Years.

*Of Plantations.*

By "Plantations" Bacon means what we should now call settlements or colonies. His term is an analogy in itself, and this extract, indeed the whole essay, is a simple extension of the same idea.

Analogies are often used in sermons (sometimes not too wisely). They do not occur much in normal conversation, because conversation seldom develops into a discourse, and it is in the discourse that the analogy has its chief place. In the following passage Hamlet is not just chatting with Guildenstern, he is chiding him to some purpose.

*Re-enter Players with recorders.* [A recorder, in case you

did not know, is a wind instrument, somewhat similar to a flute.]

HAMLET: O, the recorders! let me see one.—To withdraw with you: (Takes Guildenstern aside.) Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?

GUILD.: O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly.

HAMLET: I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?

GUILD.: My lord, I cannot.

HAMLET: I pray you.

GUILD.: Believe me, I cannot.

HAMLET: I do beseech you.

GUILD.: I know no touch of it, my lord.

HAMLET: 'Tis as easy as lying: govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

GUILD.: But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill.

HAMLET: Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret (finger) me, you cannot play upon me.

Finally, there is the famous Mrs. Partington, who needs no comment:

As for the possibility of the House of Lords preventing ere long a reform of Parliament, I hold it to be the most absurd notion that ever entered into human imagination. I do not mean to be disrespectful, but the attempt of the Lords to

stop the progress of reform, reminds me very forcibly of the great storm of Sidmouth, and of the conduct of the excellent Mrs. Partington on that occasion. In the winter of 1824, there set in a great flood upon that town—the tide rose to an incredible height—the waves rushed in upon the houses, and everything was threatened with destruction. In the midst of this sublime and terrific storm, Dame Partington, who lived upon the beach, was seen at the door of her house with mop and pattens, trundling her mop, squeezing out the sea-water, and vigorously pushing away the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic was roused. Mrs. Partington's spirit was up; but I need not tell you that the contest was unequal. The Atlantic Ocean beat Mrs. Partington. She was excellent at a slop, or a puddle, but she should not have meddled with a tempest. Gentlemen, be at your ease—be quiet and steady. You will beat Mrs. Partington.

Sydney Smith: *Speech on the Reform Bill.*

### 3. Antithesis

Antithesis is literally the setting of one thing against another. As a literary device, it is the arranging of a sentence into two parts, the second of which is the counterpart, or sometimes the reflection, of the first.

The attention of the reader is sometimes directed to an antithesis by the words *on the one hand—on the other*, but if the two companion portions of the sentence are similar in length and rhythm this is not necessary and may be undesirable.

Look out for antitheses when you are studying an author's style. They help to give balance to a sentence or a period, but too emphatic an antithesis may fall unkindly upon the ear or insult one's intelligence.

Consider these examples:

I know the precise worth of popular applause, for few scribblers have had more of it; and if I chose to swerve into their paths, I could retain it, or resume it, or increase it.



But I neither love ye, nor fear ye; and though I buy with ye and sell with ye, and talk with ye, I will neither eat with ye, drink with ye, nor pray with ye. They made me, without my search, a species of popular Idol; they, without reason or judgment, beyond the caprice of their good pleasure, threw down the Image from its pedestal; it was not broken with the fall, and they would, it seems, again replace it—but they shall not.

Lord Byron, in a letter to John Murray.

As long as he lived, he was the guiding-star of a whole brave nation, and when he died the little children cried in the streets.

J. L. Motley of William the Silent, from *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*.

They have a Right to censure, that have a Heart to help; the rest is cruelty, not Justice.

William Penn.

And yet, when all has been said, the man who should hold back from marriage is in the same case with him who runs away from battle. To avoid an occasion for our virtues is a worse degree of failure than to push forward pluckily and make a fall. It is lawful to pray God that we be not led into temptation; but not lawful to skulk from those that come to us. The noblest passage in one of the noblest books of this century (Browning's *The Ring and the Book*), is where the old pope glories in the trial, nay, in the partial fall and but imperfect triumph, of the younger hero. Without some such manly note, it were perhaps better to have no conscience at all. But there is a vast difference between teaching flight, and showing points of peril that a man may march the more warily. And the true conclusion of this paper is to turn our back on apprehensions, and embrace that shining and courageous virtue, Faith. Hope is the boy, a blind, headlong, pleasant fellow, good to chase swallows with the salt; Faith is the grave, experienced, yet smiling man. Hope lives on ignorance; open-eyed Faith is built upon a knowledge of our life, of the tyranny of

circumstance and the frailty of human resolution. Hope looks for unqualified success; but Faith counts certainly on failure, and takes honourable defeat to be a form of victory. Hope is a kind old pagan; but Faith grew up in Christian days, and early learnt humility. In the one temper, a man is indignant that he cannot spring up in a clap to heights of elegance and virtue; in the other, out of a sense of his infirmities, he is filled with confidence because a year has come and gone, and he has still preserved some rags of honour. In the first, he expects an angel for a wife; in the last, he knows that she is like himself—erring, thoughtless, and untrue; but like himself also, filled with a struggling radiancy of better things, and adorned with ineffective qualities.

Robert Louis Stevenson: *Virginibus Puerisque*.

#### 4. The Cliché

*Cliché* is the French for stereotype, the block which printers use when they are reproducing photographs; so it comes to mean something which can be used over and over again; in other words, the phrase which is borrowed by a writer or speaker to save himself the agony of thought.

Whenever any kind of entertainment is presented in Big School, the Distinguished Visitor—be he lecturer, singer, player, or actor—can observe, if he looks carefully enough amongst the serried rows of eager, intent faces, one that is slightly more so than all the others; as the eye travels downwards, it will be seen that he is applying pencil to paper; and what he is writing will later appear in print in these pages. What clichés and platitudes are fomenting in his inventive mind!

*School Magazine.*

The playing fields in Greatwood Park are no more. In their place stand serried ranks of cabbages, leeks and brussels sprouts.

*Ibid.*

*Serried rows, serried ranks*, are clichés. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* gives the meaning of *serried* as *shoulder to shoulder, without gaps, close*. Our objection to the word is not that faces can hardly be shoulder to shoulder nor that cabbages, etc., should never even in maturity be without gaps between them. One can leave that sort of quibble to the pedants. No, the real objection is (unless we are very much mistaken) that the writer has not particularly *meant* the word. For some reason or other—actual current clichés are difficult to explain, they just grow—*ranks* and *rows* have a kind of magnetic attraction for *serried*. One suspects that this is the only reason why the word has been used here. It is ready to hand. It always has been used.

To the process of description it contributes precisely nothing.

You will find clichés everywhere: in the local paper and the parish magazine, in guide books and advertisements, in Hansard's Reports of Debates in Parliament—and much nearer home, in the letters one writes and almost every casual conversation. There is more excuse for them here. Coining one's own phrases is a difficult art. Really striking phrases are not born every minute. When one does appear, worth adding to the vast assemblage that we have already, it is natural that it should be cherished. But this should not prevent you from trying to invent your own.

Here are some notorious specimens:

*replete with all modern conveniences*  
*(top hats were) conspicuous by their absence*  
*a sickening thud*  
*you could have heard a pin drop*



*a pleasant time was had by all*  
(this invention supplies) *a long-felt want*  
he stood *rooted to the spot*  
*a colourful rendering*—possibly inspired by the *coloratura*  
soprano  
*unaccustomed as I am to public speaking*  
(he rose from the table) *like a giant refreshed*  
*I haven't a clue* (I do not know.)

At every Olympic Games some newspaper man writes of the competitors as "looking like young Greek gods." This suggests that they resembled Apollo before he was grown-up, or Hermes or even Zeus himself. But Zeus and the others did not grow up. They were ageless. And they were not just "Greek gods." Hermes was Hermes and Apollo was Apollo and Zeus was superlatively Zeus. To lump them all into a class as if they were fat stock at an agricultural show reveals most poignantly the blighting influence of the cliché.

Consider the following:

Out of doors, meanwhile, the shower went on without ceasing. It had begun shortly after midnight; the ground was covered to the depth of two inches. Nepenthe lay veiled in Cimmerian gloom, darker than starless midnight—a darkness that could be felt; a blanket, as it were, hot and breathless, weighing upon the landscape. All was silent. No footfall could be heard in the streets; the powdery ashes, softer than snow, absorbed every sound. And still they fell. Those few scared natives whom necessity forced to go abroad crept about in fear of their lives. They thought the end of the world had come. Terror-stricken, they carried knives and revolvers in their pockets; they passed each other distrustfully in the streets holding, in one hand, a lighted torch or lantern, and in the other a handkerchief pressed to the face for fear of suffocation. In one or two of the shop windows could be discerned a light

glimmering feebly as through the thickest fog. All the ordinary sights and sounds of morning—the vehicles plying for hire, the cracking of whips, the cries of the fish and fruit vendors—all were gone. The deathly stillness was broken only by the clangour of the town clock, tolling the hours into a darkened world.

Norman Douglas: *South Wind*.

You may say that *a darkness that could be felt* is a cliché. And what of *They thought the end of the world had come*?

In fairness to the author one must note that this last is not just a rather hackneyed way of expressing intense dismay. They really did believe, those natives, that they were witnessing the beginning of the end of the world. Norman Douglas tells us so without emotion but sincerely enough; he is therefore completely justified in using this sentence.

All we ask of an author is that he gives proper thought to every word and phrase he uses. If he prefers to get his effects by understatement—by saying as little as he need rather than as much as he can—well, he may. The proof of the pudding . . .

### 5. Inversion

The subject of a sentence is sometimes removed from its normal position to the end of the sentence, for the sake of emphasis. Sentences composed in this way have some sort of resemblance to a procession, in which, if it be properly arranged, the principal participant occupies a position not at the beginning nor in the middle, but near the end. Consider the following examples:

In my memory's anthology of all the delights I have

known, in many years devoted to the difficult but entrancing art of changing raw experiences into the connoisseur's enjoyment of life, I gratefully place the cricket of Victor Trumper.

Neville Cardus: *Autobiography*.

If the upper-middle class, with other classes, is destined to "move on" into amorphism, here, pickled in these pages, it lies under glass for strollers in the wide and ill-arranged museum of Letters to gaze at. Here it rests, preserved in its own juice: *The Sense of Property*.

John Galsworthy: Preface to *The Forsyte Saga*.

In all lives, the highest and the humblest, there is a crisis in the formation of character, and in the bent of the disposition. It comes from many causes, and from some which on the surface are apparently even trivial. It may be a book, a speech, a sermon; a man or a woman; a great misfortune or a burst of prosperity. But the result is the same; a sudden revelation to ourselves of our secret purpose and a recognition of our perhaps long shadowed, but now masterful convictions.

Disraeli: *Endymion*.

The room lay in a high turret of the castellated abbey, was pentagonal in shape, and of capacious size. Occupying the whole southern face of the pentagon was the sole window, an immense sheet of unbroken glass from Venice,—a single pane, and tinted of a leaden hue, so that the rays of either the sun or moon passing through it fell with a ghastly lustre on the objects within. Over the upper portion of this huge window extended the trellis-work of an aged vine which clambered up the massy walls of the turret. The ceiling, of gloomy-looking oak, was excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device. From out the most central recess of this melancholy vaulting, depended, by a single chain of gold with long links, a huge censer of the same metal, Saracenic in pattern, and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed



in and out, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-coloured fires.

Edgar Allan Poe: *Ligeia*.

Up the precipitous little street that led from the station, over the old grass-grown cobbles where vehicles rarely pass, came the panting procession of the homeless and their comforting, their almost clinging entertainers, who seemed to hurry them on as in a sort of overflow of expression of the fever of charity.

Henry James: *Within the Rim*, describing Belgian refugees coming to Rye in September, 1914.

First there was a week of feasting and tourneys and high mirth of every kind. Now the trumpets blared, and upon a scaffolding that was gay with pennons and smart tapestries King Gogyrvan sat nodding and blinking in his brightest raiment, to judge who did the best: and into the field came joyously a press of dukes and earls and barons and many famous knights, to contend for honour and a trumpery chaplet of pearls.

James Branch Cabell: *Jurgen*.

## 6. The Long Sentence

Half the art of writing is the arranging of words and sentences in the best order. This may seem too obvious a point to be worth stating, but many people, as Mark Antony says, only speak right on, and when they put their thoughts to paper everything goes down upon the page exactly as it emerges from their minds. The result may be impressive; often it is not.

If it was a matter of subject first, object last, and main verb followed by adverb in between, instruction would be easy. But it is seldom as simple as that, and every writer has at one time or another to juggle not only with words and phrases but with long, complex sentences as well. Even the simple little paragraph

above first drafted itself as: *The arranging of words, etc., is half the art of writing.* Inversion, though frequently useful, as we have just explained, can be overdone. The ear alone can judge what is an aid and what an affectation.

That, we know, is rather like "saying as we take our fees, there is no cure for this disease." But rule of ear is much the same as rule of thumb: it comes of practice and watching others at work. So we are now going to give you some examples of lengthy sentences which have obviously given their authors some thought. They have done more about them than plunge in at one end and emerge in need of a breath at the other. The sentences which follow show some sense of construction. You will be able to find other examples for yourself. When you find one, take it to pieces. See how it sounds if you alter the order of some of the phrases or clauses. Most well-wrought sentences work up to a climax and it will generally be found that the portion of the sentence before the climax is appreciably longer and more elaborately constructed than the portion of the sentence after it.

For instance:

Miller's face and attitude are a study. Coiled up into the smallest possible space, his chin almost resting on his knees, his hands close to his sides, firmly but lightly feeling the rudder, as a good horseman handles the mouth of a free-going hunter,—if a coxswain could make a bump by his own exertions, surely he will do it.

Thomas Hughes: *Tom Brown at Oxford.*

How would that sound if the author had written:

If a coxswain could make a bump by his own exertions, surely he will do it, as he sits there, coiled up, etc. . . .

Better? Or not so good?

Again:

That the author of the *Religio Medici*, mounted upon the airy stilts of abstraction, conversant about notional and conjectural essences; in whose categories of Being the possible took the upper hand of the actual, should have overlooked the impertinent individualities of such poor concretions as mankind, is not much to be admired. It is rather to be wondered at, that in the genus of animals he should have condescended to distinguish that species at all.

Charles Lamb: *Essay on Imperfect Sympathies*.

The meaning of this may perplex you for a moment, for Lamb is not content only to bring the author of the *Religio Medici* into the argument, he must also indulge in a jocular imitation of his style and phrasology. But we are concerned here only with the construction of these two sentences. Notice how securely all the phrases and clauses of the first sentence are clinched together, like the lines of type in a compositor's forme, by the joint bonds of the first seven words and the last six.

Let us rewrite the second sentence:

It is to be wondered at rather, that he should have condescended to distinguish that species at all in the genus of animals.

Is it better thus, or not so good?

I cannot but notice, in speaking to gentlemen who sit on either side of this House, or in speaking to anyone I meet between this House and any of those localities we frequent when this House is up—I cannot, I say, but notice that an uneasy feeling exists as to the news that may arrive by the very next mail from the East. I do not suppose that your troops are to be beaten in actual conflict with the foe, or that they will be driven into the sea; but I am certain that



many homes in England in which there now exists a fond hope that the distant one may return—many such homes may be rendered desolate when the next mail shall arrive. The angel of death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings. There is no one, as when the first-born were slain of old, to sprinkle with blood the lintel and the two sideposts of our doors, that he may spare and pass on; he takes his victims from the castle of the noble, the mansion of the wealthy and the cottage of the poor and the lowly, and it is on behalf of all these classes that I make this solemn appeal.

John Bright: *Speech in the House of Commons on the Crimean War.*

'Tis a treat to see thee, Tom of Bedford, in thy "public" in Holborn way, whither thou has retired with thy well-earned bays. 'Tis Friday night, and nine by Holborn clock. There sits the yeoman at the end of his long room, surrounded by his friends; glasses are filled, and a song is the cry, and a song is sung well suited to the place; it finds an echo in every heart—fists are clenched, arms are waved, and the portraits of the mighty fighting men of yore, Broughton, and Slack, and Ben, which adorn the walls, appear to smile grim approbation, whilst many a manly voice joins in the chorus.

George Borrow: *Lavengro.*

Take away but the pomps of death; the disguises and solemn bugbears, the tinsel, and the actings by candlelight, and proper and fantastic ceremonies, the minstrels and the noise-makers, the women and the weepers, the swoonings and the shriekings, the nurses and the physicians, the dark room and the ministers, the kindred and the watchers; and then to die is easy, ready, and quitted from its troublesome circumstances. It is the same harmless thing that a poor shepherd suffered yesterday, or a maid-servant to-day.

Jeremy Taylor: *Holy Dying.*

Let us consider, too, how differently young and old are affected by the words of some classic author, such as Homer or Horace. Passages which to a boy are but rhetorical

commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others which any clever writer might supply, which he gets by heart and thinks very fine, and imitates, as he thinks, successfully, in his own flowing versification, at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as if he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness. Then he comes to understand how it is that lines, the birth of some chance morning or evening at an Ionian festival, or among the Sabine hills, have lasted generation after generation, for thousands of years, with a power over the mind, and a charm, which the current literature of his own day, with all its obvious advantages, is utterly unable to rival.

John Henry Newman: *Grammar of Assent*.

Edmund Burke is answering the charge that the English forces have employed Red Indians to fight against the colonists in the War of Independence:

You will not, we trust, believe that born in a civilised country, formed to gentle manners, trained in a merciful religion, and living in enlightened and polished times, where even hostility is softened from its original sternness, we could have thought of letting loose upon you, our late beloved brethren, these fierce tribes of savages and cannibals, in whom the traces of human nature are effaced by ignorance and barbarity. We rather wished to have joined with you in bringing gradually that unhappy part of mankind into civility, order, piety, and virtuous discipline, than to have confirmed their evil habits, and increased their natural ferocity, by fleshing them in the slaughter of you, whom our wiser and better ancestors had sent into the wilderness, with the express view of introducing, along with our holy religion, its humane and charitable manners. We do not hold, that all things are lawful in war. We should think, that every barbarity, in fire, in wasting, in murders, in tortures, and other cruelties, too horrible and too full of turpitude for Christian mouths to utter, or ears to



hear, if done at our instigation by those, who, we know, will make war thus if they make it at all, to be, to all intents and purposes, as if done by ourselves. We clear ourselves to you, our brethren, to the present age, and to future generations, to our king and country, and to Europe, which, as a spectator, beholds this tragic scene, of every part or share in adding this last and worst of evils to the inevitable mischiefs of a civil war.

*Address to the British Colonists in North America.*

O Almighty God, King of all kings, and Governor of all things, whose power no creature is able to resist, to whom it belongeth justly to punish sinners, and to be merciful to them that truly repent: Save and deliver us, we humbly beseech thee, from the hands of our enemies; abate their pride, assuage their malice, and confound their devices; that we, being armed with thy defence, may be preserved evermore from all perils, to glorify thee, who art the only giver of all victory; through the merits of thy only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*The Book of Common Prayer: In the time of War.*

## 7. Nouns

Nouns and the phrases or clauses that depend upon them have a tendency to drift apart, with distressing results. For instance:

Entering the harbour after a stormy night, the sun greeted us, coming up from behind the mountains in all the glory of a June morning.

It is no good the writer protesting that one knows what he means. People will always take you literally, and if there is a difference between what you say and what you intend to say they will laugh; the wider and more amusing the difference the louder will they laugh. Here the sun has had a stormy night and the voyagers are mountain-climbing in midsummer glory.



And Mr. Punch puts it in his next issue under some appropriate heading. He will not be able to put this one in because we have only just made it up, and it therefore lacks authenticity; and you may say that it is easy enough to make up funny mistakes of this kind. Of course it is; but it is also easy to perpetrate them unwittingly.

The Indian wolf . . . is deservedly credited with repeatedly attacking and killing children, and according to my experience of his character he is quite capable of doing so. Bad-tempered, greedy, spiteful, and a confirmed bully and wife-beater, I only succeeded in taming two specimens sufficiently to handle freely, and these I never felt to be fully trusted.

That appeared in a letter to *The Times* on February 25th, 1937.

The only remedy for this sort of error is (1) greater thought and (2) careful re-reading. But then this is the panacea for all literary ills.

Pronouns are very useful things. They save many tedious repetitions. But they too want watching, for they have a habit of attaching themselves to the wrong noun.

Taking out his driver he practised a swing and then addressed the ball. He swung back and then down again, taking care not to lift his head until well after he had hit the ball. Then as he raised his head he saw it sailing through the air, straight as a die down the fairway. It pitched 200 yards away and ran another 25 yards on to the green and close up to the pin.

This was from a contribution offered to the editor of a school magazine. Was he unduly captious in suggesting that this actual incident read rather like

something from the Arabian Nights? One of the troubles is that in our language so many things are referred to as "it." But careful writers keep their pronouns under control.

Some authors are like magicians only in this, that they subject every principal noun they use in a passage of narrative to a kind of transformation act, or more often a whole series of them. Subject and object may be the same throughout, but neither of them will ever be mentioned more than once in the same way.

But no political cause swelled the population as much as the potato. Introduced by Raleigh in 1610, the cultivation of this important tuber developed with extraordinary rapidity. . . . The labour of one man could plant potatoes enough to feed forty, and they could neither be destroyed nor carried away easily. When Petty wrote, early in Charles II's reign, this demoralising esculent was already the national food.

*Encyclopædia Britannica*: Eleventh Edition, Art: *Ireland*.

This is a very interesting point of history, but it would have been no less interesting if the potato had remained a potato throughout.

This device—if you want a name for it you can call it *the Protean substantive*—has its legitimate uses. It enables Gibbon, for instance, to say succinctly what otherwise he could only say in an additional sentence or two. It is part of his persuasive process: he is constantly reminding his readers of certain facts about the objects of his narrative:

Despoiled of his arms, his jewels, and his purple, Romanus spent a dreary and perilous night on the field of battle, amidst a disorderly crowd of the meaner barbarians. In the morning the royal captive was presented to Alp Arslan, who doubted of his fortune, till the identity of the person



was ascertained by the report of his ambassadors, and by the more pathetic evidence of Basilacius, who embraced with tears the feet of his unhappy sovereign. The successor of Constantine, in a plebeian habit, was led into the Turkish divan, and commanded to kiss the ground before the lord of Asia. He reluctantly obeyed; and Alp Arslan, starting from his throne, is said to have planted his foot on the neck of the Roman emperor. But the fact is doubtful; and, if, in this moment of insolence, the sultan complied with a national custom, the rest of his conduct has extorted the praise of his bigoted foes, and may afford a lesson to the most civilised ages. He instantly raised the royal captive from the ground; and, thrice clasping his hand with tender sympathy, assured him that his life and dignity should be inviolate in the hands of a prince who had learned to respect the majesty of his equals and the vicissitudes of fortune. From the divan Romanus was conducted to an adjacent tent, where he was served with pomp and reverence by the officers of the sultan, who, twice each day, seated him in the place of honour at his own table. In a free and familiar conversation of eight days, not a word, not a look, of insult escaped from the conqueror; but he severely censured the unworthy subjects who had deserted their valiant prince in the hour of danger, and gently admonished his antagonist of some errors which he had committed in the management of the war.

Edward Gibbon: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

One feels that "the royal captive," "his unhappy sovereign," "the successor of Constantine," "the lord of Asia" are justified. But watch a real quick-change artist at work:

In the north and east of Europe the danger incurred by travellers in sledges of being hunted by packs of hungry wolves is very great; and many dreadful incidents bear witness to their success. A woman accompanied by three of her children was one day travelling in this mode, when



she discovered that she was pursued by these gaunt foes in full pack. She immediately put the horse into a gallop, and drove towards her home, from which she was not far distant, with all possible speed. All, however, would not avail, for the ferocious animals gained upon her, and at last were on the point of rushing on the sledge. For the preservation of her own life and that of the remaining children, the poor frantic creature now took one of the babies and cast it to her blood-thirsty pursuers. This stopped their career for a moment, but, after devouring the little innocent they renewed their pursuit, and a second time came up with the vehicle. The mother, driven to desperation, resorted to the same horrible expedient, and threw her ferocious assailants another of her offspring. To cut short this melancholy story, her third child was sacrificed in a similar manner. Soon after this the wretched being, whose feelings may more easily be conceived than described, reached her home in safety.

Philip Henry Gosse: *The Romance of Natural History*.

It is not a matter of Gibbon being right and Gosse wrong; but there is a happy mean in all things.

### 8. The Paradox

One day, as I was leaving London for a holiday, a friend walked into my flat in Battersea and found me surrounded with half-packed luggage.

"You seem to be off on your travels," he said, "where are you going?"

With a strap between my teeth I replied, "To Battersea."

"The wit of your remark," he said, "wholly escapes me."

"I am going to Battersea," I repeated, "to Battersea via Paris, Belfort, Heidelberg, and Frankfort. My remark contained no wit. It contained simply the truth. I am going to wander over the whole world until once more I find Battersea. Somewhere in the seas of sunset or of sunrise, somewhere in the ultimate archipelago of the earth, there is one little island which I wish to find: an island with low green hills and great white cliffs. Travellers

tell me that it is called England (Scotch travellers tell me that it is called Britain), and there is a rumour that somewhere in the heart of it there is a beautiful place called Battersea."

"I suppose it is unnecessary to tell you," said my friend, with an air of intellectual compassion, "that this is Battersea?"

"It is quite unnecessary," I said, "and it is spiritually untrue. I cannot see any Battersea here; I cannot see any London or any England. I cannot see that door. I cannot see that chair: because a cloud of sleep and custom has come across my eyes. The only way to get back to them is to go somewhere else; and that is the real object of travel and the real pleasure of holidays. Do you suppose that I go to France in order to see France? Do you suppose that I go to Germany in order to see Germany? I shall enjoy them both; but it is not them that I am seeking. I am seeking Battersea. The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign lands; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land. Now I warn you that this Gladstone bag is compact and heavy, and that if you utter that word 'paradox' I shall hurl it at your head. I did not make the world, and I did not make it paradoxical. It is not my fault, it is the truth, that the only way to go to England is to go away from it."

G. K. Chesterton: from the essay *The Riddle of the Ivy*.

"The only way to go to England is to go away from it." "The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign lands; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land. . . ." These are paradoxes and, Gladstone bag or no Gladstone bag, one could find no better examples. As statements they seem absurd, but if pondered over or explained, as Chesterton takes the trouble to explain these, possibly with unnecessary elaboration, they are seen to contain more than an element of truth. And the truth they contain is made more conspicuous by the apparent absurdity.



"I did not make the world, and I did not make it paradoxical." Chesterton might have quoted the paradoxes of one who was his master in this as in all else: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

But what, you may ask, has the paradox to do with style? It has this to do with style: like the cliché, the paradox is primarily a habit of thought, and the way one expresses oneself follows the pattern of one's thoughts.

There is another thing in this passage which you should notice. Chesterton was a poet, and some of his sentences here seem to be breaking into the rhythm of poetry:

"Somewhere in the seas of sunset . . ."  
". . . in the ultimate archipelago of the earth,  
(there is) one little island which I wish to find . . ."  
"a cloud of sleep and custom has come across my eyes."

These lines are all definitely metrical. If they had all been in the same metre their presence, in one short passage of prose, would have been disturbing.

Chesterton was a great and most lovable man, but his style is not faultless. Many authors have erred in the same way. Even Dickens at times lets his emotion carry him into the cadences of blank verse, inadvertently, we may be sure, for no one would deny that it is better to avoid setting down in prose even a single line bearing the stresses of an established metre of poetry.

Consider also:

In other countries, the people, more simple and of less mercurial cast, judge of an ill principle in government only by an actual grievance; here they anticipate the evil, and



judge of the pressure of the grievance by the badness of the principle. They augur misgovernment at a distance; and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze.

Edmund Burke: *Speech on Conciliation with America*.

“... and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze.”

### 9. The Purple Patch

The term *purple patch* has been variously defined. To most people it means a passage in which the author has been at excessive pains to emphasise the emotion he feels towards his theme. The colour is laid on thick and every incident or every detail of the landscape is described with a wealth, or more frequently a mere extravagance, of epithet. For a feature of many purple patches is the tawdriness of the style.

But in the preface to the *Oxford Book of English Prose* Quiller-Couch speaks of the purple patch first as something which prose “abhors” and then a few sentences further on in the same paragraph gives as its opposite the kind of prose which has a pedestrian quality. Therefore and from his later remarks one infers that he is now thinking of the purple patch as a passage of exceptional magnificence. As examples of the purple patch he quotes “Raleigh on Death, some pages of Sir Thomas Browne, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Oration.”

The examples we give here are chosen to illustrate the more generally accepted meaning of the term. In a novel, a purple patch is often a digression; the author turns aside from his story to brood or rhapsodise or point a moral. He is often insufficiently aware of the strain he is thus putting on the patience of his readers.

“She is not dead!” he said simply,—“She has only

swooned. Let someone fetch a physician to attend her—see! she breathes!”

With a wild, half-smothered cry Prince Sovrani sprang forward to see for himself if this blessed news was true. He and the Cardinal both, seized with a passionate anxiety, gazed and gazed at the fair, beloved face in hope, in fear and longing,—and still Manuel stood beside the couch, stroking the small hand with thoughtful care and tenderness. All at once a faint sigh parted the sweet lips,—the bosom heaved with a struggle for breath. Her father fell on his knees, overcome, and hiding his face in his hands sobbed aloud in the intensity of his relief and joy, while the Cardinal murmured a devout “Thank God!” A few minutes passed, and still Manuel stood by the couch, quietly watchful. Presently the closed eyelids quivered and lifted,—and the beautiful true eyes shone star-like out upon the world again! She stirred, and tried to raise herself, but sank back exhausted in the effort. Then seeing the Cardinal, she smiled,—and her gaze wandered slowly to the bent, white-haired figure crouching beside her, whose whole frame was shaken by sobs.

“Father!” she murmured—“Dearest father! What is it?”

He lifted his tear-stained, agonised face, and seeing that the tender eyes regarding him were full of fear and wonder as well as love, he instantly controlled himself, and rising from his knees, kissed her gently.

Marie Corelli: *The Master Christian*.

With all the strength that lay beneath all the gentle languor of his habits and with the science of the Eton Playing Fields of his boyhood, he wrenched his wrists free ere the steel had closed, and with the single straightening of his left arm felled the detective to earth like a bullock, with a crashing blow that sounded through the stillness like some heavy timber stove in. Flinging himself like lightning on the Huissier, he twisted out of his grasp the metal weight of the handcuffs, and wrestling with him was woven for a second in that close-knit struggle which is only seen when the wrestlers wrestle for life and death. The German was



a powerful and firmly built man, but Cecil's science was the finer and the more masterly. His long, slender, delicate limbs seemed to twine and writhe around the massive form of his antagonist like the coils of a cobra; they rocked and swayed to and fro on the stones, while the shrill, shrieking voice of Baroni filled the night with its clamour. The vice-like pressure of the stalwart arms of his opponent crushed him in till his ribs seemed to bend and break under the breathless oppression, the iron force; but desperation nerved him, the Royallieu blood, that never took defeat, was roused now, for the first time in his careless life; his skill and his nerve were unrivalled, and with a last effort he dashed the Huissier off him, and lifting him up—he never knew how—as he would have lifted a log of wood, hurled him down in the white streak of moonlight that alone slanted through the peaked roofs of the crooked by-street.

Ouida: *Under Two Flags*.

These two pieces were both written by women. That is a mere coincidence. Don't think that the next is better, simply because it is written by a man.

Jerusalem by moonlight! 'Tis a fine spectacle, apart from all its indissoluble associations of awe and beauty. The mitigating hour softens the austerity of a mountain landscape, magnificent in outline, however harsh and severe in detail; and while it retains all its sublimity, removes much of the savage sternness of the strange and unrivalled scene. A fortified city, almost surrounded by ravines, and rising in the centre of chains of far-spreading hills, occasionally offering, through their rocky glens, the gleams of a distant and richer land.

The moon has sunk behind the Mount of Olives, and the stars in the darker sky shine doubly bright over the sacred city. The all-pervading stillness is broken by a breeze that seems to have travelled over the plain of Sharon from the sea. It wails among the tombs, and sighs among the cypress groves. The palm-tree trembles as it passes, as if it were a spirit of woe. Is it the breeze that has travelled over the plain of Sharon from the sea?



Or is it the haunting voice of prophets mourning over the city that they could not save? their spirits surely would linger on the land where their Creator had deigned to dwell, and over whose impending fate Omnipotence had shed human tears. From this mount! Who can but believe that, at the midnight hour, from the summit of the Ascension, the great departed of Israel assemble to gaze upon the battlements of their mystic city. There might be counted heroes and sages who need shrink from no rivalry with the brightest and wisest of other lands; but the lawgiver of the time of the Pharaohs, whose laws are still obeyed; the monarch whose reign has ceased for three thousand years, but whose wisdom is a proverb in all nations of the earth; the teacher whose doctrines have modelled civilised Europe, the greatest of legislators, the greatest of administrators, and the greatest of reformers; what race, extinct or living, can produce three such men as these?

The last light is extinguished in the village of Bethany. The wailing breeze has become a moaning wind, a white film spreads over the purple sky, the stars are veiled, the stars are hid; all becomes as dark as the waters of Kedron and the valley of Jehoshaphat. The tower of David merges into obscurity, no longer glitter the minarets of the mosque of Omar, Bethesda's angelic waters, the gate of Stephen, the street of sacred sorrow, the hill of Salem, and the heights of Scopus can no longer be discerned. Alone in the increasing darkness, while the very line of the walls gradually eludes the eye, the church of the Holy Sepulchre is a beacon light.

Benjamin Disraeli: *Tancred*.

### 10. The Split Infinitive

Of all literary misdemeanours, none is brought to the offender's notice more often than the split infinitive. Still, there are some points about it worth noting.

He made every effort to quickly mend the bicycle he had been given for Christmas.

*To quickly mend* is a split infinitive. It can be easily avoided by putting instead: *to mend quickly*. . . . But in this instance: *He told me tersely to kindly shut the door*, splitting the infinitive is not so easily avoided. Try: *He told me tersely, kindly to shut the door*. A comma here will help, but *tersely, kindly* sounds odd. *To shut the door kindly* suggests a society for the prevention of cruelty to doors, and tampers with the idiom: *kindly do this or that*.

Consider also:

It was proposed to empower the Council to temporarily suspend vacant Fellowships.

(Minutes of a University College Meeting.)

Members of a College Meeting are not the most likely people to let pass a badly-expressed proposal. Observe what happens if you try to de-split *to temporarily suspend*: if you move *temporarily* in front of *to*, it might be held to qualify *empower*; if you put it after *suspend*, it might qualify *vacant*. True, it might be placed at the end after *Fellowships*: at least, standing where it does, its meaning is fool-proof.

Some people, with an excess of caution, hesitate to split any part of a compound verb. They are not sure whether *to have well and truly laid this foundation stone* is permissible. Here the infinitive proper is the auxiliary *to have*, therefore there is no harm in *to have well and truly laid*. To split the infinitive one must write *to well and truly have laid*.

To say that there is no harm in *to have well and truly laid* is not the same as saying that this is the obvious or even the best position for that phrase *well and truly*. One of the attractive features of the split infinitive is

that once you know what it is you will have little difficulty in detecting it and, more important, abstaining from it. But there is no rule nor odour of repugnance about phrases being introduced into the middle of simple constructions, to break the continuity of the sentence. One simply has to trust one's ear—which is like referring to one's conscience rather than a policeman, and correspondingly more difficult.

Young as she was I was struck, throughout our little tour, with her confidence and courage, with the way, in empty chambers and dull corridors, on crooked staircases that made me pause, and even on the summit of an old machicolated square tower that made me dizzy, her morning music, her disposition to tell me so many more things than she asked, rang out and led me on.

Henry James: *The Turn of the Screw*.

We defy you to score a clear round on that sentence at the first reading. It is all a question of style. Your readers may allow you to write like Henry James when you have a story to tell like *The Turn of the Screw*.



## CHAPTER X

### IN PIAM MEMORIAM: WILLIAM TYNDALE (c. 1490-1536) AND THOMAS CRANMER (1489-1536)

We feel that it is only fitting to conclude this short study of English prose style with a tribute to the two men who more than all others have influenced its development. This is no idle claim. William Tyndale produced at the peril of his life the English translation of the Bible which formed the basis and substance of succeeding versions, notably the Authorised Version of 1611. The English Prayer Book, *The Book of Common Prayer*, which ever since its first appearance has occupied in English hearts and homes a place second only to the Bible itself, was largely the work of Thomas Cranmer.

We have already made passing reference to the influence of the Bible on writers as different as Wilde and Gertrude Stein. It is discernible also in the prose of De Quincey and Landor and Carlyle and Kipling. It is more than discernible in Milton and Bunyan and William Blake. In these, and many others.

No miracle could be greater than this, that at a time when a style was needed appropriate to the greatest of all works in the English language, a style that would survive and inspire as long as the understanding of Englishmen, the translator should be there and the author should be there to contrive it.

The chief glory of the miracle is its effect on ordinary men and women. For our affection for the Bible and

the Prayer Book is primarily a religious and not a literary affection. We do not read what is written there because of the way it is written, nor do we read, and cherish what we read, in spite of the way it is written. Our debt to Tyndale and Cranmer is that through them those brought up in the practice of Christian worship unconsciously absorb a sense of the rhythm which underlies all good prose, and a taste for the simplicity of utterance from which force and dignity proceed.

St. Luke II. 8-14

And there were in the same region shepherds abiding in the field and watching their flock by night. And lo: the angel of the lord stood hard by them, and the brightness of the lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. But the angel said unto them: Be not afraid. For behold, I bring you tidings of great joy that shall come to all the people: for unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a saviour which is Christ the lord. And take this for a sign: ye shall find the child swaddled and laid in a manger. And straight way there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly soldiers, lauding God and saying: Glory to God on high, and peace on the earth; and unto men rejoicing.

From the New Testament of 1534.

I. Corinthians XIII. 1-8

Though I spake with the tongues of men and angels, and yet had no love, I were even as sounding brass, or as a tinkling cymbal. And though I could prophesy, and understood all secrets, and all knowledge; yea, if I had all faith, so that I could move mountains out of their places, and yet had no love, I were nothing. And though I bestowed all my goods to feed the poor, and though I gave my body even that I burned and yet had no love, it profiteth me nothing.

Love suffereth long and is courteous. Love envieth not.

Love doth not frowardly, swelleth not, dealeth not dishonestly, seeketh not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinketh not evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity; but rejoiceth in the truth, suffereth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth in all things. Though that prophesying fail, other tongues shall cease, or knowledge vanish away, yet love falleth never away.

From the New Testament of 1535.

Tyndale's earliest translation of the New Testament was printed in 1525. The 1534 and 1535 editions were revisions, the latter by Tyndale himself.

The famous passage from the Corinthians, the passage which he himself was to make famous, must have been very real to Tyndale.

When at work upon the printed sheets of his first translation of the New Testament, an outlaw, hounded from city to city of the Netherlands by the Emperor's men, he had written: "If they shall burn me, they shall do none other thing than I looked for."

"Though I gave my body even that I burned. . . ." In 1536 he was betrayed to the authorities, and suffered the stake and the fire. Henry VIII made some efforts to save him, but with little hope of success. By this time Henry was hardly on diplomatic terms with the Emperor Charles and in vigorous opposition to the Pope. But if Henry could do nothing for Tyndale, for his cause he did much. Only a year later he issued a licence for the printing of an English bible, and in 1543 a chapter of the Bible was appointed to be read each day as part of the official church service.

This promoted a demand for an English liturgy. To meet it, Cranmer first produced—it was almost certainly his own composition—the Litany which was included in the later Primers and the eventual Prayer



Books. Here again is the simple grandeur of diction, of "intercession, stretching out those touching and melodious phrases, which are now of the very marrow of the English language, to all human needs, dangers, sorrows, aspirations, and efforts towards perfection, and ending with the two beautiful supplications in which the people turn at length to pray for their own necessities." (Percy Dearmer: *The Story of the Prayer Book*.)

From the Litany of Thomas Cranmer:

From all evil and mischief; from sin, from the crafts and assaults of the devil; from thy wrath, and from everlasting damnation,

Good Lord, deliver us.

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness,

From lightning and tempest; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death,

Good Lord, deliver us.

That it may please thee

to defend, and provide for, the fatherless children, and widows, and all that are desolate and oppressed;

to have mercy upon all men,

to forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;

to give and preserve to our use the kindly fruits of the earth, so as in due time we may enjoy them;

to give us true repentance; to forgive us all our sins, negligences and ignorances; and to endue us with the grace of thy Holy Spirit to amend our lives according to thy Holy Word;

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

In conclusion there is the Prayer of St. Chrysostom, translated by Cranmer from the Eastern Liturgy:

Almighty God, who has given us grace at this time with

one accord to make our common supplications unto thee; and dost promise, that when two or three are gathered together in thy name thou wilt grant their requests: Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.

## CHAPTER XI

### INCENTIVES

In 1757 Hume said in a letter to a friend :

I am writing the History of England from the accession of Henry VIII. I undertook this work because I was tired of idleness, and found reading alone, after I had perused all good books (which I think is soon done) somewhat a languid occupation.

Here, a remedy for boredom, is one incentive the writer may have.

Another is given us in that remark of Samuel Johnson's: "No one but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money." If this were true, one would have to number among the blockheads Milton, Shelley, Chaucer, Queen Victoria, John Bunyan, Shakespeare, T. E. Lawrence, Samuel Pepys, Thomas à Kempis and Jonathan Swift, who on his own confession earned nothing by his very energetic pen till the appearance of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift was then a few months short of sixty.

And if the unmercenary are blockheads, what of the extravagantly expectant? The writer is certainly a fool who sets out expecting to win from his pen financial rewards comparable to those earned in the same amount of time by a dustman or a charwoman. It is true, certainly, that if you write a best-seller you will without strain to your purse be able to ride around in fine linen and the sort of car that a dustman or charwoman might be rather embarrassed to own. But to use this argument—the possibility of your writing a best-seller—in order to persuade yourself that writing is a lucra-



tive pastime is like yielding to the blandishments of the proprietors of Pools.

Treat it all as a gamble or, better still, remove from your mind any thought of gain, and all should be well. If you expect your writings to bring you nothing in the way of regular profit, at any rate you will not be disappointed if nothing is all you get.

Remember the maxim: Literature is a good stick but a bad crutch. The man is in a happy position who finds himself well enough off through the earnings of his pen to need no other means of livelihood. He can justly bless his good fortune in possessing talents which afford him congenial and profitable exercise for the brain. But the man who works with his pen in the forlorn expectation that he will before long win through to this happy condition may find that Grub Street is a long lane, a very long lane indeed.

What then is the true incentive?

Let us call it pleasure, for that is the word we used in the first few pages of this book; and the better word *love* frightens some people. But one thing is certain. To write well, there must be in your heart a love of the things of which you write—or a fierce hatred of them, born of a love of their opposites. There are technicalities to be mastered; we hope we have made you more familiar with some of them. There are artifices which you will have discovered in our quoted extracts and elsewhere, to spurn or make your own.

But writing, like every other art, is more than standing on someone else's shoulders. Behind all these things and above all these things is the heart of compassion and the spirit of delight. If these are yours, you will not fail.

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Members of College  
Teaching Staff can borrow  
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can retain these for one  
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student of the college can  
borrow one book at a time  
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